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# The role of devotion in jyotish astrological system

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THE ROLE OF DEVOTION IN JYOTISH ASTROLOGICAL SYSTEM

by

Natalija Plamadjala

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Master of  
Arts degree in Religious Studies  
in the Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

May 2010

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Frederick M. Smith

Graduate College  
The University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Natalija Plamadjala

has been approved by the Examining Committee  
for the thesis requirement for the Master of Arts  
degree in Religious Studies at the May 2010 graduation.

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Jyotish is a life-long study that embraces many other disciplines – philosophy, psychology, medicine, economics, astronomy, religious ritual and history, among others – and demands from its votaries an alchemical blend of logic and intuition, pragmatism and idealism, realism and imagination, and analysis and synthesis.

Hart de Fouw and Robert Svoboda,  
Light on Life: an Introduction to the Astrology of India

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## INTRODUCTION

To one who does not have his birth chart, revealing the good and evil results [of previous actions] life is as dark as a house at night without a lamp.

Mānasāgarī<sup>1</sup>

### Object of the Study

The object of this study is an investigation of the connection between the Indian divinatory practice known as jyotish and Hindu devotion. By focusing on the connection between jyotish and devotion, I want to offer a new perspective on “the most prestigious and encompassing form of Hindu divination, permeating Indian society today as it has done for centuries: from its universities – where, as part of current Hindutva efforts and amidst much upheaval, astrology was recently introduced as an academic discipline – to the matrimonial columns of its daily papers.”<sup>2</sup>

Jyotish, literally meaning “light” of the heavenly bodies,<sup>3</sup> is India’s system of divination, which investigates how heavenly lights affect human life. Jyotish helps to achieve the four main goals of life: *dharma* (social and religious duty), *artha* (acquiring wealth), *kāma* (love and worldly enjoyment), and *moksha* (liberation).<sup>4</sup> Through the

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<sup>1</sup> 17<sup>th</sup> century astrological manuscript, the authorship is unclear. (Pingree, David Edwin. *Jyotiḥśāstra: Astral and Mathematical Literature*. page. 94)

<sup>2</sup> Martin Gansten, *Patterns of Destiny: Hindu Nadi Astrology*. (Lund: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2003), page 2.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Rockwell Lanman, *A Sanskrit Reader: Text and Vocabulary and Notes*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1920), page 160.

<sup>4</sup> Vasant Lad, foreword to *Light on Life: an Introduction to the Astrology of India*, by Hart De Fouw and Robert Svoboda (Twin Lakes: Lotus Press, 2003), page xix.

jyotish system of examination one can understand the karmic unfoldments in those four areas as well as learn the ways to improve them. Jyotish also can be described as a model of reality “which interprets the observed conditions of the cosmos at the time of an event in order to provide insight into the nature of that event.”<sup>5</sup>

Jyotish is sometimes referred to, especially outside India, as “Hindu astrology;” this term, however, is misleadingly sectarian, for jyotish is also practiced by Buddhists, Sikhs, Jains, Muslims and Christians, in many countries other than India.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, jyotish *is* Hindu astrology in the sense that it is an outgrowth of Hinduism, and is an intrinsic part of India’s religious and cultural experience. Jyotish is still as integral to the lives of India’s common people as are the prayers, rituals, pilgrimages, and other religious ceremonies that jyotish helps to time.<sup>7</sup>

Considering the pervasiveness of jyotish in India, as well as its noticeable recent rise in popularity in the West, the scarcity of western scholarship on the subject is surprising. David Pingree was one of the few western scholars who examined and studied the history of jyotish. Studying primary texts, Pingree produced excellent work on the history, transmission, and development of jyotish. Pingree was mostly interested in the transmission and development of the exact sciences such as mathematics, astronomy and astrology. Even though today astrology is not considered a science, it was viewed as such in the past. In fact, astrology began to disappear from European universities as late as the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup> The discussion of what “science” is deserves much more attention and research that goes beyond the scope of the present thesis. However, one obvious point is

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<sup>5</sup> Hart De Fouw and Robert Svoboda, *Light on Life: an Introduction to the Astrology of India*. (Twin Lakes: Lotus Press, 2003), page xxii.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., xxiii.

<sup>8</sup> Gansten, *Patterns of Destiny: Hindu Nadi Astrology*, 49.



that when we cross the boundaries of time and cultures the concept of “science” considerably changes. When western scholars approach an ancient eastern system, they largely focus on jyotish’s “scientific” aspect, placing it among disciplines such as mathematics, medicine, and astronomy (modern day scientific classification). Martin Gansten, for instance claims that, “The pride of place thus given to astrology is presumably due at least in part to its scientific character, by which I mean not only because of its complexity and systematic nature, but above all its claims to objectivity.”<sup>9</sup> Jyotish’s claim to objectivity derives from the fact that the planetary positions at a person’s birth may be calculated any number of times by different astrologers, with, at least in theory, identical results. Thus, Gansten argues that a personal ability on the part of the astrologer to apply the various rules of interpretation is called forth, but this is predominantly an *intellectual* skill, rather than a mystical or magical one.<sup>10</sup>

Another key factor that contributes to the scientific categorization of jyotish derives from the Hindu tradition itself. The *Kalpa Sūtra* texts, composed between the eighth and fourth centuries BCE, and concerned with ritual and law, place jyotish among the *auxiliary sciences*, known as the ‘limbs of the Veda’ (*vedāṅga*).<sup>11</sup> Its placement among the *Vedāṅgas* – which consist of the correct pronunciation of Vedic texts (*śikṣa*), the correct performance of ritual (*kalpa*), the study of grammar (*vyākaraṇa*), etymology of Vedic words (*nirukta*), and prosody (*chandas*)<sup>12</sup> – also invites analytical perception of jyotish.

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<sup>9</sup> Gansten, *Patterns of Destiny: Hindu Nadi Astrology*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Gavin Flood *An Introduction to Hinduism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), page 53.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

Jyotish's affiliation to science cannot be underestimated since the very base of it lies in the rigorous knowledge of spherical astronomy (*gola*) and astronomical calculations (*ganita*). There are different systems of horoscope calculations. For example, one of the major divisions in zodiacal measurement is the difference between the tropical zodiac (utilized by Western astrologers) and the sidereal zodiac (utilized by Eastern astrologers). Despite the differences in systems, however, the calculations of astronomical data are strictly objective. That objectivity allowed computerization of the complex astronomical and mathematical calculations that had to be done manually in antiquity. Today, anyone who has an access to a computer can obtain a basic astrological program, downloading it for free from the internet, or buying a more complex version from a specialized vendor. However, access to the calculations, no matter how accurate, does not provide one with the correct understanding of an astrological chart. The technical calculations are only a preliminary step that leads to the more complex aspect of jyotish astrology – interpretation.

Just as there are different systems of calculation, there are different styles of interpretation. The chief styles of jyotish are: *Nadi* jyotish, *Parashari* jyotish, *Jaimini* jyotish, *Tantric* jyotish, and *Tajika* jyotish; each style retains its distinctive character and capabilities, though they have repeatedly influenced each other over the centuries.<sup>13</sup> The variety of approaches leads to differences and sometimes even to contradictions between chart interpretations. However, the intricacy and inconsistency of interpretations cannot be solely ascribed to the differences in astrological styles. It is not rare to encounter contradictory predictions made by astrologers from the same astrological school. The reason may be that as in any other branch of knowledge there are knowledgeable people and there are others who simply imitate expertise in order to gain a profit. The true reason, however, according to tradition, lies much deeper.

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<sup>13</sup> De Fouw and Svoboda, *Light on Life: an Introduction to the Astrology of India*, 14.

The source of interpretations' inconsistency is rooted in myth. As we should see further, myth plays a central role in Hindu culture, and many important phenomena such as cosmological data, archetypal material, cultural and social taboos, medical information, and spiritual and mystical matters were elucidated by it.<sup>14</sup> According to one of the astrological myths, in ancient times the divine couple Śiva and Pārvatī, inflamed great curiosity among people. Since their relationship was charged with volcanic passion, knowing its details was very entertaining. At that time, the all seeing eye of jyotish was so powerful that with its help, astrologers were able to perceive all the intimate details of the divine couple's daily life. For amusement, people would come to the astrologers to hear those details. When Śiva discovered that astrologers had brazenly intruded into his personal life, he became furious and cursed all the astrologers. Since then, Śiva's wrath has not permitted astrologers to interpret horoscopes identically and agree with each other on astrological interpretations. Their ability to obtain omniscience with the help of jyotish was lost forever.

With or without considering Śiva's curse it is easy to see how astrological combinations may lead to contradictory interpretations and how different astrologers looking at the same chart may give polar opposite interpretations. For example, it is not unusual to find six planetary indications for prosperity and another six for poverty in the same chart. In this situation, the astrologer's ability to look beyond the mere calculations is called forth; intuition or divine insight is vital for the correct interpretation. Genuine astrologers have to use rational methods and intuitive powers to complement one another, and only those who become adept at both these approaches to divination can ever become fit receptacles for the *Jyotir Vidya* (the "Lore of Light").<sup>15</sup> An important practice that

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<sup>14</sup> Robert E Svoboda, *The Greatness of Saturn: a Therapeutic Myth* (Twin Lakes: Lotus Press, 1997) page 12.

<sup>15</sup> De Fouw and Svoboda, *Light on Life: an Introduction to the Astrology of India*, 36.

develops divine intuition is devotion. Therefore, it would be wrong to limit jyotish to a strictly scientific domain, ignoring an essential part of mastery in interpretation that, as we shall see, is very tightly connected to devotion.

Without denying the scientific aspect of jyotish astrology, I will illuminate another very important aspect of it – devotion. Like many other divinatory Hindu practices, jyotish astrology is immersed in religion, and by overlooking that fact, we fail to perceive the full picture of jyotish. By exploring the close links between jyotish astrology and Hindu religious practice, I argue that attending to those connections is a more holistic way to perceive jyotish astrology. This approach does not limit the jyotish system solely to an intellectual domain; it allows space for religious and mystical experiences. Examining philosophical and methodological aspects of this ancient divinatory practice, I will show that it is impossible to fully understand the jyotish astrological system without considering its connection to devotion.

### Purpose and Scope

The intention of this study is to focus exclusively on the connection between jyotish astrology and devotion in its theory and practice. I analyze that connection on two levels: textual and ritual. The textual level is addressed through presentations of texts dedicated to planetary deities, whereas the ritual level is presented through descriptions of devotional performances conducted by astrologers and their clientele. Textual references to the planetary deities are scattered throughout the immense corpus of Indian literature, beginning with the first references in the *R̥g Veda*, where Savitar, the most important of the early aspects of the Sun God is invoked by the *Gayatrī* hymn (*R̥g Veda*

3:62:10),<sup>16</sup> and continuing through *Brāhmaṇas*, *Upaniṣads*, *Purāṇas*, and great epics of *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*. Instead of focusing on one particular branch of the Vedic writings, I am going to present the most popular mythological stories. I address the ritual level through the description of everyday devotional practices, as well as the deeper analyses of the *Navagraha Homa* ritual, that is performed publicly and on special occasions.

I broaden the scope of my work to include a wider range of Hindu beliefs such as karma, reincarnation, ritual, and *bhakti* only because they are closely related to the present study. Understanding of this thesis does not presuppose an understanding of jyotish astrology in its technical aspect. Readers who find this knowledge appealing may be referred to a reliable and readily available introductory text.<sup>17</sup> Thus, I find it unnecessary to include a discussion of the technical framework of Hindu astrology.

Before moving to the discussion of methodology, it is necessary to clarify the definitions of constantly repeated terms, such as, “devotion” and “divination.” As many other terms, “devotion” can have more than one meaning. In the Hindu context, the best way to discuss devotion is through the concept of *bhakti*. The term *bhakti* is derived from the Sanskrit root *bhaj*, which means “to participate,” “to share,” “to worship,” “to be devoted to,” and “to love”.<sup>18</sup> When the term is used with persons it expresses a personal relationship characterized by love. When the term is used within a religious context it conveys a sense of choosing, worshiping, and adoring a deity.<sup>19</sup> If we examine

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<sup>16</sup> Stephen Markel, *Origins of the Indian Planetary Deities*. (New York: Lewiston, 1995), page 22.

<sup>17</sup> One of the most recent and comprehensible introductory text on jyotish astrology is *Light of Life: an Introduction to the Astrology of India* by Hart De and Robert Svoboda Twin Lakes: Lotus Press, 2003.

<sup>18</sup> Lanman, *A Sanskrit Reader*, 208.

<sup>19</sup> Carl Olson, *The Many Colors of Hinduism: A Thematic-Historical Introduction* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), page 124.

the history of the term, we find that during the Vedic period *bhakti* refers to participation in a rite, especially with sharing the sacrificial remains among participants.<sup>20</sup> In the *Rg Veda* the original conception of *bhakti* suggests a materialistic exchange between the worshipers and gods, in the sense that deities were worshiped for personal gain, or to obtain worldly rewards.<sup>21</sup> *Bhakti* in jyotish is also tightly connected to ritual, but it also incorporates the later meaning introduced in *Śvetāśvatāra Upaniṣad* (6.23) where for the first time the term implies the love of god.<sup>22</sup> In jyotish this love is a communion of mind and heart that is expressed in ritualistic actions, and that help to align oneself with the intelligence and grace of planetary deities who provide clarity in discrimination and bestow knowledge.

Within the context of jyotish, *bhakti* as a religious practice (*sādhana*) is expressed on two levels: (1) devotional practices of astrologers expressed through daily rituals, worship of *Iṣṭa Devatā* (a personal deity), and performances of sacrifice (*homa*); (2) remedial measures (*upāyas*) performed by both astrologers and clientele to propitiate the planetary deities in order to receive their grace in return. Both levels anticipate *bhakti* as a means to a goal – liberation from being negatively affected by the planets in astrological work and personal life.

The second central term – divination – is also complex, and since its nature reaches beyond the limits of objective empirical stratum, requires special attention. Divination literally means “pertaining to the gods;” the sanskritic etymology of this word goes back to the term *daiva* which means “coming from the gods,” or “divine

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<sup>20</sup> Olson, *The Many Colors of Hinduism: A Thematic-Historical Introduction*, 124.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

appointment,” i.e. fate.<sup>23</sup> Gansten succinctly presents the chronology of this term’s usage in relation to jyotish:

*Daiva* ‘divine,’ a Sanskrit cognate of *divinatio*, appears in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* [one of the oldest Upaniṣads that was composed between 600 to 300 BCE]<sup>24</sup> as a branch of learning – ‘soothsaying’ or ‘the science of portents’ – together with such disciplines as mathematics, theology, astronomy, etc. Several of these bear a close relationship to Vedic religious praxis – not least the astronomy, which also contained a fair measure of astral divination, though of a less elaborate variety than the horoscopic astrology later imported from the Hellenistic world. In the later language especially, *daiva* generally means ‘fate, destiny,’ and the epithet *daivajña* ‘knower of fate’ is used of diviners, particularly astrologers.<sup>25</sup>

Although divination literally means “pertaining to the gods” or to the divine, in jyotish the term “divination” is not necessary limited to those forms of prophesy in which a personal deity is believed to communicate through human agents. Through the research of jyotish texts and interviews of practicing astrologers, I was able to detect three levels of divination in jyotish. The first level is based on purely mechanical applications of the astrological rules for casting and interpreting of the horoscopes. On this level, there is no direct connection to the supernatural powers, and the astrologer utilizes strictly intellectual capacities. The second level requires special alignment of the astrologer’s mind, since the interpretations are acquired through tapping into the impersonal field of knowledge that helps to decode the impersonal patterns of reality. Finally, the third level presumes the communication with planetary gods who bestow knowledge and wisdom.

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<sup>23</sup> Lanman, *A Sanskrit Reader*, 173.

<sup>24</sup> Flood *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 40.

<sup>25</sup> Gansten, *Patterns of Destiny: Hindu Nadi Astrology*, 2.

While the first two levels of divination are valid and widely used by astrologers, I would argue that in the traditional jyotish context at least, divination is viewed in close relation to communication with the planetary gods. The building of that communication or connection to the higher realm of gods, in jyotish is established through the devotion that is expressed in rituals. The present study, then, examines the divinatory system of jyotish in its connection to devotion, particularly as evinced in certain Sanskrit texts as well as the performance of rituals.

### Sources and Method

As stated above, my objective is to examine the divinatory system of jyotish astrology, with particular reference to its underlying devotional assumptions. I attempt to do this through a study of (1) early Vedic texts, (2) texts of Hindu narrative traditions that include the *Mahābhārata* and the Purāṇas, (3) ancient classical astronomical and astrological texts such as, *Br̥hat Samhitā*, *Br̥hat Parāśara Hora Śāstra*, and *Br̥hat Jātaka*, and (4) modern astrological texts. Two other important sources of astrological knowledge and devotional practices are: (1) personal interviews conducted with three practicing Indian astrologers, two of them face to face interviews administered in Fairfield, IA during the fall of 2009 and spring of 2010, and the third interview conducted over the phone in the fall of 2009; (2) field work consisting of the multiple *Navagraha Homa* ritual observations that were performed in the fall of 2009, at the Śrī Devi Mandir temple in Fairfield, IA.

The study is thus divisible into three major sections, the first and the last of which are based partially on interviews, but largely on textual sources, and the middle section which is based on observation of ritual. The method of the section that deals with ritual may be described as one of participant observation; it aims at a description of the



*Navagraha Homa* ritual as seen through the eyes of a practitioner, and related in descriptive/narrative form.

The textually oriented first and third sections differ to some extent with regard to method. The first section, aiming at an overview of the main jyotish concepts that directly demonstrate the devotional aspect of jyotish, is more synthetic in nature. In this part, I try to synthesize and show the reasons why devotion is so important as well as how it is expressed in the practitioner's everyday life. The third section is more expository. There, I briefly present the textual heritage of jyotish, and investigate how texts are seen as an important part of devotional practice and how they are used in two ways, pedagogical and remedial. Overall, the texts are selected and examined to illuminate the devotional aspect of the jyotish divinatory system.

CHAPTER 1  
ASTROLOGICAL CONCEPTS AND DEVOTIONAL PRACTICES:  
WHY, WHO, AND HOW ASTROLOGERS WORSHIP

The Creator, Brahma, has written on the foreheads of all living beings their fates which are deciphered by the astrologers through their pure insight.

Kalyana Varma (Sārāvalī 2:1-5)

In this chapter, I will argue that devotion is an important aspect of jyotish astrology, and describe the basic religious concepts that link jyotish and devotional practice. I will also describe those devotional practices, which are usually manifested through the daily rituals, worship of family gods and goddesses, and planetary worship. Even though the last component of devotional practices – planetary worship – is mentioned in this chapter, due to its complexity, a full discussion of it will be rendered in the second chapter.

During each interview with the practicing astrologers I asked: “Can you become a good astrologer without practicing devotion?” The common answer was: no. All three interviewees told me that one cannot become even a mediocre astrologer without some form of devotional practice. The three possible reasons why devotion is so important in jyotish can be summarized as: (1) The belief that planets may influence or “grab”<sup>26</sup> an astrologer’s mind which leads to distorted prediction. Only if the astrologer is under the protection of a personal deity will his<sup>27</sup> mind stay clear and connected to the divine

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<sup>26</sup> The nine planets in jyotish are called Nine Grahas. In Sanskrit the word Graha means a Seizer. This term first came from the verbal root “Grabh,” in *Rigveda*; later, “grah” – 1. Grasp; seize with the hand; hold ; take; – 2. take possession of; get. (Lanman, *A Sanskrit Reader*, 152)

<sup>27</sup> Traditionally jyotish astrology has been practiced by men. The classical astrological works were written by men for men; I was not able to find any publications by women. Even though today women are becoming disciples and practitioners of jyotish, the majority of them come from the western countries. With my hopes to break masculine monopoly in jyotish, I still

source that provides clarity.<sup>28</sup> (2) Due to the complexity of karma a situation may have more than one outcome. Thus, in times of confusion when mere technical/theoretical knowledge leads to contradictions, practitioners entreat a deity for intuition which will direct them to the most likely outcome.<sup>29</sup> (3) Constant worship of the divine creates an inner power that helps not only to discriminate the complexities of karma but also to determine the best possible remedies to avoid its hardships. Practitioners believe that direct connection to the divine is so strong that remedies prescribed by a devoted astrologer *must* have an effect. This is in direct contrast to remedies prescribed by an astrologer who is not supported by the divine, which may be ineffective.<sup>30</sup> Thus, three important components of successful astrological practice such as: clear mind, intuitive discrimination, and inner strength to prescribe effective remedies, are facilitated through devotional practice.

The idea that astrologers can establish personal relationships with planets derives from a belief that planets are not dead matter composed of gas and rock floating in space but living bodies: “Just as human personalities reside within physical bodies, the corporeal planets act as physical bodies for the nine deities who are the Great Graspers.”<sup>31</sup> The nine Grahas<sup>32</sup> are perceived as divine beings that have various individual characteristics, tastes, moods, and powers. The divinity of the planets is clearly depicted in many ancient texts. For example, *Brihat Parāśara Hora Śāstra* states:

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use “he” when referring to an astrologer, in this way, more honestly depicting current sexual ratio in the world of jyotish astrology.

<sup>28</sup> De Fouw and Svoboda, *Light on Life: an Introduction to the Astrology of India*, 35.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Kumar Ashok Bhargava, interview by author. October 24, 2009

<sup>31</sup> De Fouw and Svoboda, *Light on Life: an Introduction to the Astrology of India*, 35.

<sup>32</sup> Nine planets in jyotish are called Nine Grahas.

3-4. The unborn Lord has many incarnations. He has incarnated as the 9 (Nava) Grahas to bestow on the living beings the results due to their Karmas. He is Janardan. He assumed the auspicious form of Grahas to destroy the demons (evil forces) and sustain the divine beings.

5-7. From Surya the incarnation of Ram, from Chandra that of Krishna, from Mangal that of Narasimh, from Budh that of Buddha, from Guru that of Vaman, from Shukr that of Parashuram, from Shani that of Kurma (Tortoise), from Rahu that of Varah (Pig) and from Ketu that of Meen (Fish) occurred. All other incarnations than these also are through the Grahas. The beings with more Paramatmans are called divine beings.<sup>33</sup>

The planetary *devas* can help their devotees as do any other forms of God, granting them well-being, grace and wisdom. Moreover, as verses 5-7 indicate the incarnation of avatars through the planets carry a strong astrological force.

The jyotish astrological system is complex in that it discriminates between a specific planetary deity, who is identified primarily with the planet, and the general divine powers ruling over the planet, which have broader indications and correlations.<sup>34</sup> Hindu astrology does not simply identify its great Gods with the planets; there are instead three levels of planetary deities. First, each planet has its own specific deity (*devatā*<sup>35</sup>). This is the deity relating directly to the planet and expressed by its name, like Sūrya for the sun or Chandra for the moon. These planetary deities are mainly astrological in nature. Second, the jyotish system recognizes another deity that stands above the planetary ruler and plays the role of its overlord (*adhidevatā*<sup>36</sup>). For example, Agni, the

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<sup>33</sup> R Santhanam, trans. *Brihat Parasara Hora Sastra of Maharishi Parasara* (New Delhi: Ranjan Publications, 1984), page 12.

<sup>34</sup> David Frawley *Ayurvedic Astrology: Self-healing Through the Stars*. (Wisconsin: Lotus Press, 2005), page 133.

<sup>35</sup> *Devata*, from Sanskrit translates as *godhead* or *divinity*, both as abstract and concrete. (Lanman, *A Sanskrit Reader*, 172)

<sup>36</sup> *Devata + adhi*, from Sanskrit *adhi* translates as over; besides; in addition; above. (Lanman, *A Sanskrit Reader*, 115)

fire god is the overlord for Surya, the sun. This overlord represents general qualities and energies associated with and ruled by the planet, like the sun and fire. Third, each planet has a supreme deity (*pratyadhidevatā*<sup>37</sup>) whose power exists above the other two. This is the aspect of supreme God working through the planet, like Lord Vishnu for the sun, or Lord Śiva for the moon.<sup>38</sup> This scheme is reminiscent of a Russian nesting doll, where the greater aspect encompasses the smaller. *Devatās* are not perceived as different gods; rather, they are seen as different aspects of the same divine energy, which leads to an organic connection between astrology and the worship of the Gods in all their forms<sup>39</sup>.

Now, coming back to the very first point that planets, or *Grahas*, can influence, or grab, the astrologer's mind, we want to investigate the mechanics of such an influence. How exactly do planets affect people? One explanation is that a *graha* belongs to a group of astral forces which can enter one's body and take control of one's being; the *grahas* can grab and possess.<sup>40</sup> "A *graha* grabs hold of your being with its emanations and directs you, for better or worse, to perform particular actions that you might not otherwise perform, in pursuit of goals that which may not agree with your personal *dharma*."<sup>41</sup> The Rg Veda (10.161.1) speaks of a *grāhī*, a female spirit, which seizes people, causing death,

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<sup>37</sup> *Devata + prati + adhi*, in Sanskrit *prati* has more than one meaning; in the given context I translate it as – 1. in respect to; over against.

<sup>38</sup> Inden, R. B. "Changes in the Vedic Priesthood." *Ritual, State, and History in South Asia: Essey in Honor of J.C. Heesterman*. By A. W. Van Den Hoek, D.H.A. Kolff, and M. S. Oort. New York: E.F. Brill, 1992. page569.

<sup>39</sup> Sarathi Vempati, interview by author, November 2009.

<sup>40</sup> De Fouw and Svoboda, *Light on Life: an Introduction to the Astrology of India*, 32.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid;

*Dharma* is a Sanskrit term that has multiply meanings. Some of them are: – 1. custom; right; duty; virtue; good works; correct course of conduct. (Lanman, Charles R. *Sanskrit Reader*, p.175);

disease, and fainting.<sup>42</sup> It is important to understand, however, that planetary possessions are not random occurrences. The *grahas* are the agents of the law of karma. In the workings of cause and effect not much is left to chance. The planets direct people to experience the reactions to actions that have been previously performed. The horoscope can be seen as a map of karmas, down to the specifications of the nine *Grahas*.<sup>43</sup> The necessity to better understand the mechanism of planetary influence leads us to the discussion of karmas – the cradle of jyotish astrology.

Jyotish astrology presupposes both an element of determinism or predictability and a certain measure of freedom to act on the part of the individual. If the future were absolutely undetermined, there could be no possibility of predicting it, and astrology, like all forms of divination, would simply cease to exist. If, on the other hand, the future were absolutely predetermined, there could be no question of advising one or the other course of action, or mitigating an evil fate. In the classical medical treatise *Caraka Samhitā*, a disciple inquires of the sage Ātreya: “Verily, my lord, is all life (*āyus*) of fixed duration or not?”<sup>44</sup> In his response Ātreya argues that longevity depends on combination of fate and effort (past and present actions), each of which may vary not only in merit value, but in force:

One should understand fate to be action performed by oneself in a previous body, whereas that which is done in this [lifetime] is known as human effort. In these two [forms of] action there is a distinction of strength and weakness. Action, indeed, is of three kinds: inferior, middling, and superior. When both are superior, their combination determines life to be both long and happy; the reverse, if [the combination] is inferior [...] A weak fate is obstructed by human effort, while weak [present] actions

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<sup>42</sup> Frederick M. Smith *The Self Possessed: Deity and Spirit Possession in South Asian Literature and Civilization*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), page 475.

<sup>43</sup> De Fouw and Svoboda, *Light on Life: an Introduction to the Astrology of India*, 32.

<sup>44</sup> Gansten, *Patterns of Destiny: Hindu Nadi Astrology*, 54.

are obstructed by a strong fate [...] Therefore, when both are seen, acknowledging only the one is unsound.<sup>45</sup>

That combination of fate and effort allows the freedom for change in destiny, and within that freedom, an astrologer can advise, warn, or encourage action. Nevertheless, jyotish astrology recognizes even deeper gradations of karma according to which not all aspects of destiny can be changed.

Karmas are divided into four categories: *Sañcita* (a collection of all karmas, the sum total of all past actions), *Prārabdha* (the karmas that are ready to be experienced during the present lifetime and appear as fate or destiny), *Kriyamāna* (karmas that consist of the total potential effect created by current actions and could be changed by effort; also known as ‘free will’), and *Āgama* (approaching karmas or capacity to envision future actions)<sup>46</sup>. Further, karma is classified by its intensity. There are three degrees of karmic intensity: (1) *Dṛdha*, or fixed karma; (2) *Dṛdha-Adṛdha*, or fixed/non-fixed karma; and (3) *Adṛdha*, or non-fixed karma.<sup>47</sup> Fixed karmas appear in a horoscope where confluence exists. Confluence occurs wherever many astrological factors unite in their indications. In real life, it is usually experienced as occurrences that simply ‘happen,’ despite all efforts to avoid them. Fixed/non-fixed karmas occur wherever some (but not most) factors relating to a particular area in horoscope unite in their indications. These karmas are the most important ones for our analysis since they *can* be changed (although with a considerable effort). Finally, non-fixed karmas present wherever no confluence exists. This is like a having a clean slate on which one may write what one pleases.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> De Fouw and Svoboda, *Light on Life: an Introduction to the Astrology of India*, 28.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 31.

This knowledge of karma's intricacies is important precisely because it directly links jyotish astrology with devotion. As the possibilities of changing one's destiny arise, they require certain procedures or actions. Those actions are known as remedies, which usually take various forms of service and devotion. The remedies may include the recitation of sacred texts; recitation of ritually elaborate private or public mantras that may go on for days, months, or years; the wearing of specific gemstones or other objects; the consumptions of particular foods or other preparations; performances of *pūjā*<sup>49</sup> that may include worship of the fire, the planets, and/or certain deities; physical austerities; the observance of fasting and other vows; or oblation and donation. There is no limit to the *karma* (action) that one can do and thus, the remedial measures that can be undertaken are limitless. Specific book like the *Red Kitab*<sup>50</sup> prescribes all kinds of remedial measures that can range from throwing a few kilograms of coal into the river to keeping a pot of water from the burial ground in the house.<sup>51</sup> The remedial methods can be categorized as *sāttva*, *rājas*, or *tāmas* on the basis of the *guṇa*<sup>52</sup> of the remedy. All actions such as recitation of holy scriptures, prayers, temple activities, feeding the pious or the poor fall in the category of *sāttva guṇa*. All actions that are born out of ignorance and that cause harm to another creature or the environment can be grouped as *tāmas guṇa*. All actions that are performed due to selfish desire or born out of passion, are

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<sup>49</sup> From Sanskrit *pūjā* translates as honor. It comes from the verbal root *pūj*: to honor. (Lanman, *A Sanskrit Reader*, 193) In the contexts of this paper I refer to honor that is done to the gods or planetary Devas.

<sup>50</sup> *Red Kitab* also known as *Lal Kitab* (*lal* – red, *kitab* – book) originally written in Urdu, is a treatise on palmistry and astrology. Today, it is widely used among Indian astrologers as a source of remedial measures. The authorship of the book is disputed.

<sup>51</sup> Sanjay Rath, *Vedic Remedies in Astrology*. (New Delhi: Sagar Publications, 2000), page 11.

<sup>52</sup> *Guṇa* – here used as philosophical technical term, one of the three pervading qualities of all nature: *sattva*, 'goodness,' *rajas*, 'passion,' and *tamas*, 'darkness.'



assigned to *Rājas Guṇa*. Since the main purpose of remedial measure is to burn the effects of past wrongdoings, the karmic remedy should preferably fall in the category of *sāttva*. If the karmic remedial measure is of *Rājas Guṇa*, the cure is temporary while if it is of *Tāmas Guṇa*, the cure is short-lived and creates an additional malefic influence<sup>53</sup>. For instance, if an animal sacrifice is done to fulfill a selfish desire, the individual might enjoy its benefits for a while. At the same time, however, he or she assumes the responsibility for taking an innocent life, and will have to grapple with negative karmic consequences in the future.

An astrologer who gives *sāttvik* advice is producing good karma and is believed to be blessed by Viṣṇu while an astrologer who gives the advice of *tāmasic* remedies is punished by Śiva. The astrologers who fail to give any advice or remedial measure fall in the middle category of *rājasik* karma and their efficacy as astrologers is always suspect.<sup>54</sup> In this way, astrology is not only a descriptive art, which attempts to analyze and interpret the qualities inherent in karmas, but also a prescriptive discipline. It advises on how to make the best use of time by undertaking or refraining from particular actions. Also, it advises the best possible way to mitigate the ill effects of evil periods by acts of *śānti*<sup>55</sup>: propitiation or pacification.<sup>56</sup>

The term *śānti* takes its roots in *Atharva Veda*, more precisely, in the text named *Śāntikalpa*. The name of this text derives from the fact that it contains the ritual for the *adbhūtamahāśānti* or “great ceremony for averting the evil effects of omens and portents” which is most frequently spoken of in the Atharvan ritual as simply the

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<sup>53</sup> Rath, *Vedic Remedies in Astrology*, 10.

<sup>54</sup> Rath, *Vedic Remedies in Astrology*, 10.

<sup>55</sup> *Śānti* from Sanskrit –1. a ceasing, stopping; esp. the absence of the evil results of some word or thing or evil omen. (Lanman, *A Sanskrit Reader*, 257)

<sup>56</sup> Gansten, *Patterns of Destiny: Hindu Nadi Astrology*, 50.

*mahaśānti* and even occasionally as the *śānti*.<sup>57</sup> Another useful term for remedy in jyotish is *upāya*. This is also a Sanskrit word that literarily means “that by which one reaches an aim,” “approach,” or “method.”<sup>58</sup> Utilizing a rightly prescribed *upāya*, or method, a well-motivated person may substantially change the course of her destiny. Yet it is interesting to note that since the force of the karma strongly impedes a change in destiny, the karmas will themselves interfere with the person’s motivation to implement the remedy.<sup>59</sup>

In astrology, the anticipation of misfortune is deduced from planetary positions in the astrological chart. The particular forms of *śānti* to be chosen, including the deity or deities to whom ritual worship is directed, are also astrologically determined.<sup>60</sup> As we have already seen, given that there is a correlation between the planets and the greater Hindu pantheon, so may the astrological afflictions of any planet be counteracted by worship of the corresponding deity. For example, according to Parāśara’s system, if the moon is afflicted in a horoscope, then the goddess Durga is worshiped. A cow is donated, and offerings of rice, ghee, and curd are made during the performance of the *yajña*, a fire sacrifice that is done by the *Agnihotrīs* or Brahman priests.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, donating valuables which symbolically correspond to a planet may alleviate the affliction. Thus, a person suffering under the malefic influence of a badly placed Mercury may be advised to give away a horse and recite the thousand names of Viṣṇu.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> George M Bolling, “The Cāntikalpa of the Atharva-Veda” Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association, Vol. 35 (1904), The Johns Hopkins University Press pp. 77-127

<sup>58</sup> Lanman, *A Sanskrit Reader*, 134.

<sup>59</sup> De Fouw and Svoboda, *Light on Life: an Introduction to the Astrology of India*, 31.

<sup>60</sup> Kumar Ashok Bhargava, interview by author, October 24, 2009; Sarathi Vempati, interview by author, November 2009.

<sup>61</sup> Rath, *Vedic Remedies in Astrology*, 11.

<sup>62</sup> Gansten, *Patterns of Destiny: Hindu Nadi Astrology*, 58.

There are many different systems and thousands of possible combinations for prescribing remedies to the individuals. The virtuosity of any given astrologer consists in his ability to prescribe the best effective remedy. Taking into consideration the complexity of karmic entanglements and the variety of possible remedies it is not an easy task. In order to successfully accomplish this task an astrologer uses a mixture of knowledge and intuition that is nourished by his worship of his *Iṣṭa Devatā*, or a personal deity.<sup>63</sup> Yet, it would be wrong to say that astrologers worship only one personal deity. According to Rath, there are three guiding deities for any given astrologer, or, as a matter of fact, for any human being. The first is the *Iṣṭa Devatā* or the deity guiding the individual soul towards emancipation; second, the *Kula Devatā* or the deity guiding one in the present life to improve one's life and surroundings; and the third is a teacher, or *Guru Devatā*. These three forms are the primary tripod of one's life and are akin to the Sun (natural signifier of the soul), Moon (natural signifier of mind and well being in this life), and Jupiter (natural signifier of a Guru).<sup>64</sup>

Usually, any particular worship of these *devatās* is immersed into the broader devotional practices of a jyotish astrologer. As a rule (if anything can be taken as a rule in Hinduism), there are three main outlets of devotion for astrologers: (1) daily rituals; (2) worship of specific family god/goddess; (3) personal or public worship of planets. Now, let's look at the first two devotional practices in more detail (the third practice – a planetary worship – is discussed in Chapter 2).

In reality, as any other personalized practice, the daily ritual may vary from one astrologer to another. Nevertheless, a similar pattern may be detected, as

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<sup>63</sup> Kumar Ashok Bhargava, interview by author, October 24, 2009

<sup>64</sup> Rath, *Vedic Remedies in Astrology*, 11.

*sandyāvandanam*<sup>65</sup>, or a daily ritual has certain regulations.<sup>66</sup> Before rendering the description of daily ritual it would be helpful to mention that what we have in view is the traditional daily life of a brahman (all three astrologers whom I interviewed and who practice *sandyāvandanam* were brāhmins). If done accordingly to the Vedic customs *sandyāvandanam* is usually preformed three times a day: during the sunrise, at noon, and on the sunset. The heinous sin should befall on a brahman who does not perform *sandhyā* thrice a day.<sup>67</sup>

In the morning, after bathing, the astrologer repeats the morning prayers, which is done sometimes near the tank of water, or river. Before the prayer can be said, however, the *punḍrams*,<sup>68</sup> or special auspicious marks must be daubed on.<sup>69</sup> If the prayers are said at the water, the worshiper will simply make the marks on this forehead with water, or with earth from the riverbed. The morning prayer begins with the repeating of mantras that drive away evil spirits. The worshiper takes three sips of water, repeating the names Keśava, Nārāyana, Mādhava, which apply either to Viṣṇu or Śiva, according to his sect. This sipping of water is called *ācamanam* and is done before every religious ceremony<sup>70</sup>. Three oblations, or pouring out of water, are again made to the sun, during which *Gayatri* mantra is repeated three times. Three more sips of water are taken, when, taking hold of

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<sup>65</sup> *sandyāvandanam* consists of two Sanskrit words: (1) *Samdhyā* meaning time of junction (of day and night), i.e. morning or evening twilight, and (2) *√vand* meaning praise, solute reverently.

<sup>66</sup> Kumar Ashok Bhargava, interview by author, October 24, 2009; Sarathi Vempati, interview by author, November 2009.

<sup>67</sup> Shanti Lal Nagar, trans. *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa* (Delhi: Parimal Publications, 2001), 1: page 468.

<sup>68</sup> This term comes from the Sanskrit root *√pund* meaning to rub, grind, or to reduce to powder; thus the term *punḍra* refers to the sectarian mark that is applied to the forehead.

<sup>69</sup> Sarathi Vempati, interview by author, Fairfield, IA, November 2009.

<sup>70</sup> Kumar Ashok Bhargava, interview by author, October 24, 2009

his sacred thread the worshipper again repeats the *Gāyatrī* at least ten times – marking off the times on the fingers or on the joints of the fingers. After this, with clasped hands, he addresses a special prayer to the sun. Then, he turns to the four quarters of the compass, in the order of east, south, west, and north (the turning must always be to the right – an auspicious direction), repeating at each quarter a prayer addressed to the god of this direction. The prayer concludes with the worshipper mentioning his name, *gotra* (the lineage or clan), and family.<sup>71</sup>

The *Gāyatrī* mantra mentioned earlier enters so largely into the Hindu daily ritual that it may be helpful to describe at greater length its great importance. Like many other prayers it begins with mystical AUM. The origin of this trilateral syllable is explained by Manu, “[76] The Lord of Creatures milked out of the three Vedas the syllables ‘a,’ ‘u,’ and ‘m,’ and (the exclamations) ‘Bhūh!’, ‘Bhuvah!’, ‘Svah!’”<sup>72</sup> The *Gāyatrī* is often referred as the “mother” mantra, the most sacred of all Hindu prayers. It must be repeated at least thirty times every day: ten each for morning, noon, and evening prayers.<sup>73</sup> Instructions for its morning and evening repetitions as well as benefits obtained from its utterance are also described by Manu:

[101] He should stand and chant the verse to the sun-god during the morning twilight until he sees the sun, and he should sit (and chant it) during the evening twilight until the constellations appear clearly. [102] When he stands and chants during the morning twilight he dispels the guilt of the night, and when he sits (and chants) during the evening twilight he destroys the dirty deed done during the day [...]  
IV [94] Because of the length of their twilight rituals, the

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<sup>71</sup> Padfield, J. E. *The Hindu at Home: Being Sketchers of Hindu Daily Life*. (Madras, 1896), page 40.

<sup>72</sup> Wendy Doniger and Brian K Smith, trans. *The Laws of Manu*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1991) page 28.

<sup>73</sup> Sarathi Vempati, interview by author, November 2009..

sages won long life, wisdom, fame, renown, and the splendor of the Veda.<sup>74</sup>

So sacred is this mantra held by Hindus, that a pious brahman would close his ears with horror if he heard it uttered by impure lips.<sup>75</sup> *Gāyatrī* is one of the most ancient of all Vedic prayers, and it remains the essential part of the daily ritual.<sup>76</sup>

The midday *sandyāvandanam* or noon prayers begin by another application of *puṇḍramas* or sacred marks. The prayers are exactly the same as those above described for the morning, except that the special prayer to the family god is uttered.<sup>77</sup> The oblations to the names of ancestors are made, after which comes the daily worship of family gods. However, Puranic text prescribe to first bow down and offer salutations to spiritual teacher and then start adoring the family god. “Guru is well aware of the family god, but the family god is not aware of the teacher and as such the teacher happens to be superior than the family god.”<sup>78</sup> Moreover, guru is the one who reveals the mantras of the family god and describes the form of god’s adoration besides other details.<sup>79</sup>

The family god worship may consist of bathing the images, rubbing them with sandalwood paste, and application of *puṇḍrams*.<sup>80</sup> Small lamps filled with ghee are lit before them, and they are worshiped by the offering flowers, incents, and ringing of the small bell. That follows by different foods offerings that after sanctification are turned

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<sup>74</sup> Doniger and Smith, trans. *The Laws of Manu*, 28, 82.

<sup>75</sup> Padfield, *The Hindu at Home: Being Sketches of Hindu Daily Life*, 42.

<sup>76</sup> Sarathi Vempati, interview by author, November 2009.

<sup>77</sup> Kumar Ashok Bhargava, interview by author, October 24, 2009

<sup>78</sup> Shanti Lal Nagar, trans. *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa* (Delhi: Parimal Publications, 2001), 1: page 117.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Sarathi Vempati, interview by author, November 2009.

into *prasād* and consumed by the worshiper. In addition, special rituals are performed during the bigger celebrations to honor the family gods. These celebrations occur on special occasions connected to the deities' life events.

Finally, the evening prayer, which should be performed at sunset, is the same as that of the morning and noon *sandyāvandanam*, except that instead of special prayer to the sun there is inserted one to Varuṇa, the god of the waters.<sup>81</sup> The cycle of a spiritual daily routine ends with the utterance of the evening prayers. Ideally, one's connection to the divine should never cease, and daily rituals are the means to maintain that connection. The morning purification ritual awakens the connection, midday prayer stabilizes it, and the evening prayer secures its continuation throughout the night.

In ritual, offering incense to the icon of a deity mediates between, or is thought to open a channel of communication between, the devotee and the transcendental power embodied in the icon.<sup>82</sup> Since the astrologer is responsible for altering the destinies of others, and mistakes in this matter are costly, his mind should be constantly tuned in with the divine. It is believed that if astrologer makes the wrong predictions, in his next life he is doomed to be born blind. Thus, in order to protect himself through ritual he submits to the guidance of a higher power, in this way sharing the responsibility with the divine. The worship routine described above, however, comes from the ideal Vedic paradigm. Taking into consideration modern ways of life, very few astrologers follow this time consuming system fully. Thus, one can find variations in the degree of performance of daily rituals in accordance with work schedule and religious affiliation to a particular sect.

The daily rituals embody the second component of astrologers' devotional practice – worship of a specific family god/goddess. From about 500 BCE through the

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<sup>81</sup> Padfield, *The Hindu at Home: Being Sketches of Hindu Daily Life*, 49

<sup>82</sup> Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 14.

first millennium CE, there was a growth of sectarian worship of particular deities; *pūjā* rose to be the central religious practice for majority of Hindu believers.<sup>83</sup> Performance of *pūjā* (devotional worship) became a way of expressing love or devotion (*bhakti*) to a deity. It consists of making offerings to deities and in turn receiving blessings from them.<sup>84</sup> A devotee might be initiated into one of the three great traditions of Hinduism, such as *Śaiva* tradition whose worship is focused on the god Śiva, a *Vaiṣṇava* tradition whose worship is focused on Viṣṇu or one of his incarnations, or a *Śākta* tradition whose focus is the Goddess in one of her manifestations. A devotee would offer private *pūjās* to his chosen deity (*Iṣṭa Devatā*), performed alone before the deity's icon each day, while at the same time maintaining a public ritual life and fulfilling his household obligations.<sup>85</sup> The daily worship of deities is performed not only by brahmans, but by all Hindus.<sup>86</sup> Initiation to a certain tradition is usually determined by birth, thus an astrologer, like any other Hindu, inherits his family tradition of certain god/goddess worship. In this way, preserved through generations, the religious practice of family god/goddess worship continues to be an essential part of any astrologer's spiritual practice.

In contrast to the first two devotional practices of daily rituals and worship of family gods/goddesses which are more personal in nature, the third spiritual rite – planet worship – is more universal. Sectarian affiliation plays little or no role in the standard procedure of planet worship. In addition, public rituals are more complex than the simpler, domestic rites. Even though planetary worship could be performed in the privacy of one's home, its rather elaborate nature brings it out to the public domain. Taking into

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>84</sup> More detailed description of the process of deity worship was provided above, within a context of a daily ritual, under midday *sandyavandanam*.

<sup>85</sup> Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 215.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 208.



consideration the complexity and importance of public worship, I dedicate a separate chapter to its description and analysis. Thus, we are moving to the second chapter where the third component of the astrologers' devotional practice is described, namely participation in a public planetary worship.

## CHAPTER 2 THE HISTORY AND PRACTICE OF VEDIC ASTROLOGICAL RITUAL

One striking feature of Hinduism is that practice takes precedence over belief. What a Hindu does is more important than what a Hindu believes.

Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*

In this chapter, I will discuss a public astrological ritual by briefly following its history and focusing on the present practice of it. I begin by looking at theoretical aspects of Hindu ritual. Then, I present the history of astrological worship and describe the planetary deities. Further, taking an anthropological approach, I present my direct observations of the ritual dedicated to the planetary worship. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the connections between an astrological ritual and devotion.

Hindu temple worship is a set of very colorful and highly ritualistic practices that involve the active engagement of a believer. Hindu ritual is both an experience and an action. Believers participate by reciting mantras, prostrating, dancing, receiving blessings in the forms of water, fire, and food, and by offering flowers, food and devotion (*bhakti*) to the deities. The temple deities are treated as living beings. Every day they are awakened, bathed, dressed, provided with food, and put back to sleep. For Hindus, faith is determined by *actions*, not by words or concepts. In *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, Diana Eck states:

Many Westerners for example, upon seeing Hindu ritual observances for the first time, are impressed with how sensuous Hindu worship is. It is sensuous in that it makes full use of the senses – seeing, touching, smelling, tasting, and hearing. One “sees” the image of deity (*darśan*). One “touches” it with one’s hands (*sparśa*), and one also “touches” the limbs of one’s own body to establish the presence of various deities (*nyāsa*). One “hears” the sacred sounds of the *mantras* (*śravaṇa*). The ringing of bells, the

offering of oil lamps, the presentation of flowers, the pouring of water and milk, the sipping of sanctified liquid offerings, the eating of consecrated food – these are the basic constituents of Hindu worship, *pūjā*.<sup>87</sup>

Temple *pūjā* ordinarily involves the presentation of “honor offerings” to the deity. A simple *pūjā* may consist of flowers and water offerings. The worshiper also receives both the sight of the deity (*darśan*), and the sanctified food (*prasād*). More complex worship consists of more elaborate forms of reverence. These rites involve the presentation of a number of articles of worship, called *upacāras*, or “honor offerings” to the deity. The number of offerings presented may vary, but sixteen is considered a proper number for a complete worship (*pūjā*).<sup>88</sup>

Ideally, *pūjā* should be preceded by a preparatory ritual and should end with a fire ritual (*homa*).<sup>89</sup> *Homa* or *yajña* (both meaning sacrifice) was the central religious practice of the Vedic Aryans, who shared the sacrificial meal with each other and with the many supernatural beings or *devas*.<sup>90</sup> The term “sacrifice,” however, is not confined to the immolation of animals, but refers more widely to any offering into the sacred fire, notably of milk, ghee (clarified butter), curds, grains such as rice and barley, and the *soma* plant. Indeed the offering of milk into the fire was more common than animal offering.<sup>91</sup> During *homa* the ritual substances are transported through the fire (*agni*) to *devas* which are invoked. Fire serves as the transformative link between the worldly and

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<sup>87</sup> Diana L Eck, *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 3rd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), page 12.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>89</sup> Pandya, Surendra. interview by author, March 6, 2010.

<sup>90</sup> Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 208.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 41.

divine realms and is the central focus of Vedic ritual. *Agni* is both a basic element and a *deva*.

The same principles are used in the worship of the planetary deities. The planetary deities are among the most frequently worshipped and propitiated of all Indian divinities.<sup>92</sup> To simply pay their obeisance while circumambulating the main shrine of the temple, worshippers perform a smaller circuit of a platform on which the nine planetary deities are placed. On special occasions or when in difficult circumstances, a worshiper would sponsor or participate in *navagraha śānti pūjā* and/or *homa*. This performance propitiates all nine planets and may last from two to four hours and may involve a *homa* as well as a special *pūjā*. These ceremonies are participatory: the sponsor is intimately involved in the *navagraha homa* by repeating mantras, making offering to the fire, prostrating, and taking sanctified food. Veneration of planetary deities is very common and plays an important role in the devotional life of astrologers and Hindu believers. It stands out among the other practices of *Graha Śānti* (pacification of the planets) such as charitable acts (*dāna*), mantra recitation (*japa*), fasts, pilgrimages, and daily rituals.<sup>93</sup>

One of the early patterns of public astrological worship dates back to 500 CE and is described in *Atharva Veda*. The ritual is called *nakṣatrāṇām upacārah* (attendance or service to *Nakṣatras*)<sup>94</sup> and is a preliminary ceremony for the *abhūtamahāśānti* – the great ceremony for averting the evil effects of omens and portents.<sup>95</sup> This ritual however, must have had other applications than serving as an introduction to the *abhūtamahāśānti*,

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<sup>92</sup> Markel, *Origins of the Indian Planetary Deities*, 19.

<sup>93</sup> Pandya, Surendra. Interview by author, March 6, 2010.

<sup>94</sup> From Sanskrit √car + upa: attend, come to serve.

<sup>95</sup> Bolling, "The Cantikalpa of the Atharva-Veda," 80.

since its independence is indicated by the marked transition with which text turns to the *abhūtamahāsānti* itself.<sup>96</sup> The ritual's structure distantly resembles present day astrological worship, yet the object of devotion differs. In Vedic times lunar astrology was practiced and twenty eight *Nakṣatras*, or asterisms of the lunar zodiac, were perceived and worshiped as deities.

The *nakṣatrāṇām upacārah* is performed as follows: the priest, clothed in a new garment, covers with a new cloth the seats for the *Nakṣatras*, which are situated to the east of the fire. He places pictures, or images made of wood or metal, of the *Nakṣatras* facing west, i.e. facing the fire. The placing of each *Nakṣatra* is accompanied by a laudatory *śloka*. For example, the priest announces the first *Nakṣatra*, Kṛttikā, as "I shall have brought hither the beautiful Kṛttikā, honored by the gods: come hither, O neutral goddess, the eldest daughter of Dakṣa, the beautiful."<sup>97</sup> The color for each *Nakṣatra* is prescribed, and flowers, garments, and ointment of corresponding colors are given to them with the words, "May their worships the *Nakṣatras* receive these."<sup>98</sup> Then, reciting different mantras from *Atharva Veda*, he offers ghee (*ājya*) and grains (*havis*). *Havis* from Sanskrit translates as oblation, which as a gift for the gods, is offered wholly or partially to the fire; generally, it is grain, but it also could be milk, ghee, and – best of all – Soma.<sup>99</sup> At the end of the ceremony the priest puts fuel in the fire, recites the *abhaya*<sup>100</sup> hymn, and bring the ritual to its closure.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Bolling, "The Cantikalpa of the Atharva-Veda," 83.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>99</sup> Lanman, *A Sanskrit Reader*, 285.

<sup>100</sup> *A-bhaya* from Sanskrit translates as "dangerless" or as a noun "safety."

<sup>101</sup> Bolling, "The Cantikalpa of the Atharva-Veda," 82.

It is interesting to notice, however, that even though astrological worship is one of the most ancient Hindu practices, the astrologer has not always occupied a consistent status. Astrology has a complex history, and despite its tight religious connections, it has not always been considered an honorable occupation.<sup>102</sup> Manu places astrologers among the fallen and impotent men who “are unworthy of the offerings to the gods and ancestors.”<sup>103</sup>

[150] Manu has said that priests who are thieves, fallen men, or impotent men, or atheists are unworthy of the offerings to the gods and ancestors. [151] At a ceremony for the dead one should not feed (a student or ascetic) with matted hair, anyone who has not studied (the Veda), a weakling, a gambler ... [152] doctors, people who sell meat ... [153] and anyone who has mangled fingernails or discolored teeth; [155] a man who has shed his semen in violation of a vow, the husband of a servant woman ... a one-eyed man ... [158] an arsonist or poisoner, a gambler, a drunk; [161] an epileptic, a man with swollen glands, a leper, a slanderer, a madman, a blind man ... [162] an astrologer – all these are to be strenuously excluded.<sup>104</sup>

The placement of an astrologer among the drunkards, thieves, and lepers points to the polluting quality of astrology. One possible reason is the belief that dealing with other people’s karma is polluting. After all, doctors are placed in the same category for the similar reason – they deal with polluting sicknesses. If the doctors deal with the sickness of body, the astrologers deal with the “sicknesses” of destiny, which are seen as

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<sup>102</sup> Gansten, *Patterns of Destiny: Hindu Nadi Astrology*, 50

<sup>103</sup> Doniger and Smith, trans. *The Laws of Manu*, 59.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

contaminating. Another *dharma* text, the *Baudhāyanadharmasūtra*, takes a similar stand proclaiming that “taking counsel with the stars” is a minor polluting sin.<sup>105</sup>

The rise of astrologers to public power began during the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, when a new form of astronomy became dominant in India. Before that time there were certainly astronomers or astrologers and *jyotiḥśāstra* was an important “limb” (*anga*) of the Veda.<sup>106</sup> This older astronomy, however, was lunar in its orientation, and was mainly confined to identifying and predicting the recurring astronomic phenomena which signaled occasions for Vedic rituals. The new astronomy, appropriated from the Near East, was primarily solar. It introduced the tropical year of 365 days and the seven day week. The absorption of this new knowledge by Hindu society brought with it other important changes. The new astrologer (*sāmyatsara*) not only introduced rites of planetary worship and pacification, he also involved himself with new rituals for the installation of images of the gods.<sup>107</sup> “Rites such as these were, in the next few centuries, to displace the other *Śrauta*<sup>108</sup> religion and liturgy from the center of the Indian stage.”<sup>109</sup>

As early as the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE, an astrologer became an important public persona tightly connected to the religious matters. Varāhamihira calls for a king to appoint both an astrologer and a royal priest for the performance of the Bath of Prosperity, which

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<sup>105</sup> Gansten, *Patterns of Destiny: Hindu Nadi Astrology*, 50.

<sup>106</sup> Inden, "Changes in the Vedic Priesthood," 569.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 570.

<sup>108</sup> The *Śrauta* rites required the burning of three sacred fires. The principles deities which were the focus of *Śrauta* observances were the fire god Agni and the plant god Soma, to whom, milk, clarified butter, curds, vegetable cakes, animals or the soma plant itself would be offered into the fire.

<sup>109</sup> Inden, "Changes in the Vedic Priesthood," 570.

could be performed on the occasion of a ceremonial bath into kinship.<sup>110</sup> In the later 8<sup>th</sup> century CE, the *Viṣṇudharmottara* proclaims the astrologer to be an expert on Pāñcharātra and the protector of the king; it is quite clear that by that time the astrologer had become the chief priest of the kingdom.<sup>111</sup> Moreover, the claims of the astrologer extended into another domain, for *Br̥hat-saṃhitā* asserts that he should also be “occupied with the image worship of the gods, vows, and fasts.”<sup>112</sup> This indicates the rise of the astrologer’s social and religious status as well as the growing commitment to image worship opposed to the older Vedic sacrifice.<sup>113</sup>

The image worship of the planets as independent objects of devotion developed gradually. Artistic, epigraphical, and literary evidence suggests that the cult of the *navagraha* became popular during the late medieval period in eastern India and Southeast Asia.<sup>114</sup> The astral iconography, however, began earlier with the introduction of an illustrated Greek manuscript on astrology from Egypt.<sup>115</sup> This manuscript was translated into Sanskrit as the *Yavanajātaka* by Yavaneśvara in 150 CE in the territory of the Western Kṣatrapas.<sup>116</sup> The *Yavanajātaka* presents material that has contributed to a great extent to the images of the planets in India. The most direct contribution was its correlations of the planets with various colors, directions and substances; for the images

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110 Ibid.

111 Inden, "Changes in the Vedic Priesthood," 571.

112 Ibid.

113 Ibid.

114 Markel, *Origins of the Indian Planetary Deities*, 11.

115 David Pingree, “Indian Planetary Images and the Tradition of Astral Magic” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 52 (1989), pp. 1-13

116 Ibid.



of the planets made for worship or propitiation were often composed of special substances, colors, and established in specific directions.<sup>117</sup>

With the spread of *navagraha* worship, some variations in posture and attributes developed in accordance to the images' provenance. Textual references also show minor discrepancies in the portrayal of the *navagraha* images. Different *Purāṇas* (the collections of myths about deities), for example, describe the planetary deities differently. For instance, the image of the sun, *Sūrya*, in the *Matsyapurāṇa*, the first text that furnishes anthropomorphic descriptions of the planetary deities in the group known as the *navagraha*,<sup>118</sup> is described as follows:

The image of the God Son who causes the lotus to bud, should be made as seated on a lotus (*Padmāsana*) with color like that of a lotus, with two hands, with a lotus in one hand and the other hand raised in the posture of giving blessings, and having seven horses in His chariot, drawn by seven reins.<sup>119</sup>

In the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* the Sun is depicted slightly differently. He has four arms, wears armor and his color is red. Also, the adherence to the northern style of clothing and attributes is specified:

Ravi [*Sūrya*] has a good form. His color is as red as *Sindūra* (Vermillion). His mustache is bright. He has four arms. He is dressed in northern style and wears armours. He is adorned with all armaments. He wears a girdle which is known as *Yāviyāṅga* (which is the same as *avyāṅga* – the girdle worn by *Maga* priests). *Raśmi* i.e. reigns in his right and left hands should be shown. They have the forms of a garland whose threads go up and full of all kinds of flowers... The remaining two hands of the sun-god should

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<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>118</sup> Markel, *Origins of the Indian Planetary Deities*, 154.

<sup>119</sup> A Taluqdar of Oudth, trans. *Matsya Puranam* (Allahabad: The Panini Office, 1916), page 257-258.

be on the heads of [his two attendants]...He should be represented as seated in a chariot. His chariot has one wheel, six spokes and is drawn by seven horses. His chariot is Aruṇa...<sup>120</sup>

Despite some minor differences, however, there is a consistent pattern of depiction, and *navagraha* deities are easily recognized in any Hindu temple.

The *navagraha* temple rituals can be complex or simple, but most of them share veneration of nine planets. The planets are perceived as living gods who project powerful cosmic forces, both positive and negative. In the same way, their replicas, the planetary statues are not seen as merely material objects, but as the vessels of subtle mental and emotional planetary energies. They are lords of fate “incarnated.” In order to establish personal relationships with planetary *devas*, believers worship their physical representations by performing *pūjās* and other devotional rituals. In this way, astrological worship remains an integral part of Hindu temple worship, and the special altars for the *navagrahas*, or nine planetary deities, are found in most major temples.<sup>121</sup>

In a temple the *navagraha* altar is usually located in a corner of a temple room.<sup>122</sup> Even though all planetary deities are located on the same platform, each faces the appropriate direction and is adorned by a significant color. Sūrya (the sun) is placed on the east<sup>123</sup> and is usually represented in a great chariot that has one wheel and is drawn by seven horses. He has a lotus in each hand, wears armor, has a shield over his breast, and is surrounded by a halo of light. Candra (the moon) is placed in *vāyu-koṇa*

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<sup>120</sup> Stephen Markel, "Visnudharmottarapurāna," appendix to *Origins of the Indian Planetary Deities* (New York: Lewiston, 1995), page 191.

<sup>121</sup> Frawley, *Ayurvedic Astrology: Self-healing Through the Stars*, 132.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> A. B. L. Awasthi, *Studies in Skanda Purāṇa, Part IV: Brahmanical Art and Iconography* (Lucknow: Kailash Prakashan, 1979), page 206.

(north-west).<sup>124</sup> He is clothed in a white garment, surrounded by a halo and holds the attributes of the rosary (*akṣamālā*) in his right hand and the water vessel (*kamaṇḍalu*) in the left. Mangala (Mars) is placed in the south. He is clothed in red garments, adorned with a pearl necklace (*hara*) and has a tripartite hairstyle (*śikhābdaka*) which resembles a peacock's comb<sup>125</sup>. Budha (Mercury) is placed in the north<sup>126</sup> and is clothed in yellow garment; he typically holds a large arrow, and appears in standing images with one leg bent in an archer's pose (*ālīḍha*). Bṛhaspati (Jupiter) is placed in the *Īśāṇa-koṇa* (north-east).<sup>127</sup> He is clothed in golden yellow garments and typically holds a rosary and an ascetic's water vessel that signify his religious nature. Śukra (Venus) is placed in the *Agni-koṇa* (east-south corner).<sup>128</sup> He is clothed in white garments, and usually carries the rosary and ascetic's water flask (*kamaṇḍalu*).<sup>129</sup> Occasionally Śukra is also represented bearing treasure (*nidhi*) and a book (*pustaka*).<sup>130</sup> Śani (Saturn) is placed in the west. He is clothed in black garments, is small in stature and has peculiar limping stance (*īsarpangu*). He has two arms bearing a stick (*daṇḍa*) and a rosary (*akṣamālā*). Rāhu (ascending node of the moon also known as the demon of eclipses) is placed in *Nairrti-koṇa* (south-west corner). He is usually clothed in blue garments and have dark figure with terrific face, holding shield (*carma*), sword (*asi*), *śakti*, and spear (*śūla*) in his hands.<sup>131</sup> Rāhu is also frequently depicted as a demonic head without the upper torso,

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Markel *Origins of the Indian Planetary Deities*, 41.

<sup>126</sup> Awasthi, *Studies in Skanda Purāṇa*, 206.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> N Gangadharan, trans. *Agni Purāṇa* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1984), page 137.

<sup>130</sup> Markel, *Origins of the Indian Planetary Deities*, 50.

<sup>131</sup> Awasthi, *Studies in Skanda Purāṇa*, 206.

arms, or hands.<sup>132</sup> Ketu (descending node of the moon also known as “the personification of comets”<sup>133</sup>) is generally depicted as either male or female serpentine figure holding a sword and a lamp.<sup>134</sup>

In most cases, a peculiar depiction of a planet is due to its mythological description. The planets are perceived as living beings, and a vast collection of stories that describe their birth, adulthood, interpersonal relations, love affairs, wars, sicknesses, and triumphs, is scattered throughout the *smṛti*<sup>135</sup> literature. For instance, a depiction of Rāhu as demonic head comes from the *Mahābhārata* story<sup>136</sup> that recounts how demon Rāhu was decapitated by Vishnu while drinking *amrita* – nectar of immortality. Since Rāhu swallowed a sip of that nectar, his head became immortal, and since then he is doomed to remain crippled, deprived of the torso and other body parts.

While the statues of planetary deities play a major role in devotional activities, now I want to focus on the planetary worship that doesn’t involve veneration of nine planetary images. As Eck points out, in exploring the nature of images in the Hindu context we must make a further distinction between the iconic and the aniconic image.<sup>137</sup> The iconic image is one which is representational; it has a recognizable “likeness” to its

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<sup>132</sup> Markel, *Origins of the Indian Planetary Deities*, 50.

<sup>133</sup> Markel, *Origins of the Indian Planetary Deities*, 50.

<sup>134</sup> Gangadharan, trans. *Agni Purāṇa*, 137.

<sup>135</sup> From Sanskrit *smṛti* translates as “that which is remembered.” Those texts are considered to be of human authorship; they were remembered and orally transmitted from one generation to another. The following types of literature fall into the category of *smṛti*: the *Dharma Sūtras* (600-200 BCE), the epic *Mahābhārata* (composed between 300BCE and 300 CE), the epic *Rāmāyaṇa* (composed between 200 BCE and 200 CE) and the *Purāṇas* (began to be composed around 400 CE).

<sup>136</sup> *The Mahābhārata: the Book of the Beginning* trans. by J.A.B. van Buitenen (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1973), 75.

<sup>137</sup> Eck, *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 32.

mystic subject. As was demonstrated by the nine planetary statues who mirror the mythological descriptions of planetary *devas*. By contrast, the aniconic images are those symbolic forms which, although they refer to a deity, do not attempt any anthropomorphic form or any representational likeness.<sup>138</sup> The Vedic ritual tradition has generally been seen as aniconic, for there is no evidence of images or of permanent temples or sanctuaries.<sup>139</sup> Vedic religious rites were primarily centered around the sacred fire: that was both a focus and a vehicle of ritual activity.

The *navagraha homa* is one such representation of a Vedic rite, where planetary *devas* are worshiped through the fire sacrifice. The *Matsyapurāṇa* makes *homa* the central act of planet worship describing the vast beneficial results of offering oblations in the fire to the planets.<sup>140</sup> No iconic planetary images are involved in the ceremony; instead, the nine planets are represented as nine circles drawn on the edges of a fire altar. The origin of this ceremony dates back to the *Atharvaveda*, where the “planets [*grahāḥ*] wandering in heaven” (19:9:7) are invoked along the Mitra, Varuṇa, Vivasvat, and Mṛtyu in order to secure blessings and prosperity.<sup>141</sup> The outline of this ritual was probably similar to *nakṣatrāṇām upacāraḥ* (described above), yet the *Atharvaveda* makes a clear distinction between the planets and *nakṣatras*. Since I have no textual reference describing *navagraha homa* in detail at that time, it would be hard to speculate about the ritual’s layout. However, the devotional nature of it, and its aim to pacify and venerate the planets in order to secure blessings and prosperity, are clearly defined in the text.

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<sup>138</sup> Eck, *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 32.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> A Taluqdar of Oudth, trans. *Matsya Puranam*. (Allahabad: The Panini Office , 1916), 93.

<sup>141</sup> Ralph T.H. Griffith, trans. *Hymns of the Atharva Veda* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1985), 2: page 219.

The aim of planet veneration and pacification was preserved through the centuries and the *homa* ritual is still widely practiced today in various temples in India and abroad. I attended one such ceremony in the Hindu temple – Śri Devi Mandir – in the fall of 2009. Śri Devi Mandir opened on October 7, 2002, during *Navarātrī* –the Nine Nights of Mother Divine, and is located in Fairfield, IA, a small rural community in southeast Iowa. This temple is an independent spiritual organization, not affiliated with any spiritual teacher or group.<sup>142</sup> About twenty devotees of different background and origin gathered to honor the planetary *devas* in the early Saturday morning. About fifty percent of the congregation were South Asian, two percent Hispanic and the remaining forty eight percent were Caucasian Americans. Some women were dressed in colorful *saris* and *panjabi* (traditional outfits), while the majority of men preferred European clothing.

As one of many other Hindu rituals, the *navagraha homa* was preceded by worship of Gaṇeśa (half man half elephant deity) the remover of all obstacles. Gaṇeśa, the Lord of Beginnings, is worshipped at the outset of every important event. While reciting Sanskrit mantras, the priest offered incense, water, five-wicked oil lamp, fruits, and flowers to Gaṇeśa. Then he approached the congregation and distributed the offered fruits, which after offering became consecrated, or the “grace” (*prasādam*) of the Lord to the devotee. In addition, devotees were offered to symbolically touch the fire which is also considered holy.

After receiving the blessings and removal of possible obstacles by Gaṇeśa, the *navagraha homa* began. The congregation moved to the conjoined temple room that is equipped with the brick altar for fire ceremonies. Since no iconic imagery is used in the ceremony, planets were represented as nine yellow circles that were drawn by priest using turmeric powder on the four edges of the square altar. On the top of the circles the

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<sup>142</sup> Sri Devi Mandir, <http://www.sridevimandir.org/> (accessed March 9, 2010).

offering of rice, red kumkum powder, and rose petals were placed. The priest sat in front of the altar facing east. To the right of the priest spread all the honoring offerings (*upacāras*) – fruits, water, fresh leaves, sandalwood perfume, incense, coconut, honey, and different kinds of grains. The congregation settled on the floor around the altar that is located near the center of the room. Everyone had a small plate filled with rice, barley, red beans, and black sesame seeds: the offerings for the planets that would be thrown in the fire on different occasion during the *homa*.

After lighting the fire on the altar, the priest begins by the “calling” of the deity by reciting Sanskrit hymns. While it is believed that God is present in any consecrated image, the “calling” and “dismissal” prayers provide a special framing of the ritual honor-offerings, and they make it clear that the omnipresent God is not restricted by the multiple “image-incarnations.”

The oblation began by the offering of ghee to the fire. Using long wooden spoon (*sruva*) the priest slowly poured ghee into the fire to the accompaniment of the ringing of a hand-bell and recitation of hymns. The ceremony continued with offerings of rice, water, spices, and incense. The beginning and the end of the invocation of each planet was marked by priest’s request for congregation to repeat Sanskrit verses dedicated to that planet. After repeating the part of a planetary hymn, and exclaiming “*svāhā*”<sup>143</sup> everyone would repeatedly throw grains to the fire. The recitation of hymns and repetition of offerings continued for about forty minutes. Gradually the *homa* approached its culmination – circumambulation of the altar and final offering of fruits, coconut, honey, incense, and flowers. The priest gave a signal to rise. The congregation slowly moved in a clockwise direction around the altar. Still seated and reciting mantras, the priest prepared the final oblation and offered it into the fire. The fire consumed the

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<sup>143</sup> The exclamation “*svāhā*” meaning “hail” is used when making oblations, or at the end of invocation is used like Amen.

offering and smoke and heat filled the room. After the circumambulation was done three times, everybody prostrated themselves and offered their personal prayers. Then everything quieted and the priest put a sacred mark using ash from the fire on the forehead of each devotee. The *homa* ended with the prayer of dismissal; the deities were given leave to depart. This description fits a typical ritual performance, and the same procedures are repeated almost every Saturday morning at the *Śri Devi Mandir* temple.

After describing the exterior sequence of the *homa* ritual, it is important to discern its internal mechanism. There is a physical and a mental aspect of the sacrifice. The physical aspect (described above) encompasses the *actions* of the priest and the sacrificer. The mental aspect of the sacrifice represents the *internal attitude* of the sacrificer, which should correspond to the external action. Humphrey and Laidlaw underline the importance of intentionality in a ritual:

Action may be said to be ritualized when the actor has taken up what we shall call the ‘ritual commitment’, a particular stance with respect to his or her action...So to understand the behavior of our fellows we need to grasp the intentional concept of action, and to do this we have to rely on the implicit ascription to them of believes, desires, and prior intentions (or purposes).<sup>144</sup>

In the case of the *navagraha homa*, the ritualistic throwing of grains into the fire, circumambulation of the altar, prostration, and repetition of Sanskrit mantras need to be understood through the lens of intention. The believers perform physical actions that express their emotional or mental state. Whether they came to show their respect and reverence for the gods, or they perform propitiation in order to receive material gain in return, or they aspire for complete surrender to the divine, they all participate on both –

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<sup>144</sup> Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw, *The Archetypal Actions of Ritual: A Theory of Ritual Illustrated by the Jain Rite of Worship* (Oxford University Press, 1994), page 93.



external and internal – levels of the ritual. Although the internal level remains concealed, in fact it is the driving force that sets in motion the external mechanism.

One of the intentions that believers express through the ritual is a desire to express devotion and establish genuine reciprocal connection with the divine. The *devas* are beings intimately connected with, and, indeed, defined by the sacrifice as a class of supernatural beings who accept offerings, and in return give help,<sup>145</sup> or in the case of more wrathful deities such as Śani (Saturn), simply withhold their negative influences. In this regard, mantras that address *devas* are not simply sounds to repeat, but rather they express deep devotion and belief in the divine forces. Mantras embody within their sound a power both to express the truth and to bring it to reality,<sup>146</sup> and they play an important role in mental part of the sacrifice. By reciting Sanskrit mantras associated with a particular deity, the reciter can form a mental vision of the deity. The priests believe that they are reproducing in sound the very structure of reality, because of their conviction about the correspondence between sound and reality.<sup>147</sup> The pronunciation of the mantras is a performative act, which means that it makes something happen. In this case it gives impulse to the power inherent within the mantra and sets in motion the process of connection between a *deva* and devotee.

Moreover, the internal devotional mood is reinforced and expressed through human acts and gestures that directly convey the devotion. Those are the gestures of humility – bowing, kneeling, prostrating, and touching the feet of deities. Thus, devotional intentions, which are usually manifested through emotions of deep regard and veneration, remain an essential part of jyotish worship.

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<sup>145</sup> Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 208.

<sup>146</sup> Olson, *The Many Colors of Hinduism: A Thematic-Historical Introduction*, 45.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

While in a broader context a ritual action is understood as a phenomenon that anchors people in a sense of deeper identity and belonging to tradition, in a devotional context the ritual can be seen as a worshiper's expression of veneration that invokes reciprocity from the divine. Through participation in, or performance of *navagraha* rituals, astrologers reinforce their connection to the nine planetary *devas* and receive grace (*prasāda*) and power (*śakti*) that helps them rightly discriminate and give effective advice to their clients.<sup>148</sup> In this way, the third component, the *navagraha* worship, plays just as important role as the other two rites – daily ritual and worship of family gods/goddesses (described in Chapter 1) – in the spiritual life of an astrologer.

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<sup>148</sup> Ashok Kumar Bhargava, interview by author, October 4, 2009.

CHAPTER 3  
JYOTISH NARRATIVE TRADITIONS AS AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL AND  
SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

More than a mere mathematic regularization of divinatory schemes, Jyotish is itself a living narrative which weaves together the lives that its interpretations and predictions touch.

Robert Svoboda, *The Greatness of Saturn: a Therapeutic Myth*

This chapter will focus on the textual heritage of jyotish tradition. A variety of texts relate to jyotish, and there is a variety of ways for approaching them. I will briefly discuss the variety of those texts, and will move to the main subject of the chapter – the traditional usage of jyotish oral and written texts by practitioners. I will take an insider’s approach, presenting a text not as a tool that helps scholars track and better understand the development of jyotish tradition, but rather as a tool that serves two very important roles within the tradition: pedagogical and remedial. Firstly, I will present jyotish narration as an educational memory tool, which is used to preserve and transmit astrological knowledge. Secondly, I will uncover and investigate the connections between the planetary narrations and devotional practices. More precisely, I will investigate how listening, reading, or reciting text is seen as a devotional practice and an astrological remedial measure.

The scope of literature pertaining to jyotish ranges from the early Vedic hymns, the composition of which probably began during the first centuries of the second millennium BCE,<sup>149</sup> to present day introductory astrology books. The vast body of that literature can be organized into four basic categories: (1) *śruti*, or revelations – the

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<sup>149</sup> Frederick M. Smith “Vedas and Vedic Religion.” *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Online edition, 2000), page 1.

earliest layer of Vedic literature that includes the *Ṛg Veda Samhitā*, *Sāma Veda Samhitā*, *Yajur Veda Samhitā*, and *Atharva Veda Samhitā*; (2) *smṛti*, or texts of human authorship – the Hindu narrative tradition that includes two Epics, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the Purāṇas, and miscellaneous secular texts; (3) ancient classical astronomical and astrological texts, such as: *Bṛhat Samhitā*, *Bṛhat Parāśara Hora Śāstra*, and *Bṛihat Jātaka*; and (4) modern astrological texts.

The first category, the Vedic texts, contains the earliest references to the planetary deities.<sup>150</sup> In the Vedas, the sun, moon and stars are given the most prominence, while the remaining five planets – Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn – receive scant attention.<sup>151</sup> The *Atharva Veda*, for instance, dedicates a total of fifteen hymns to the glorification of the sun, and often mentions its two epithets of Sūrya and Savitar within other hymns. The Sun-God is usually praised among other gods (2.16.1), or he is identified with Agni (19.65.1), or even praised as the supreme deity, who comprehends in himself other gods (13.4.1-56). The moon, Candra, is also praised among Vāyu, Sūrya, and other gods.<sup>152</sup> However, more prominently, he is extolled along with *nakṣatras* in prayers for protection and prosperity (19.8.1-2). Also, lunar phases are mentioned and addressed in the hymns for new and full moon (7.79-81).

There are no explicit references to *navagraha* planets in the *Ṛg Veda*,<sup>153</sup> yet as was mentioned earlier, the *Rig Veda* (10.161.1) speaks of a *grāhi*, a female spirit, which seizes people, causing fainting, disease, and death.<sup>154</sup> The *Atharva Veda* also mentions

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<sup>150</sup> Markel, *Origins of the Indian Planetary Deities*, 131-132.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>152</sup> Griffith, trans. *Hymns of the Atharva Veda*, 1: 50.

<sup>153</sup> Markel, *Origins of the Indian Planetary Deities*, 132.

<sup>154</sup> Smith, *The Self Possessed: Deity and Spirit Possession in South Asian Literature and Civilization*, 475.

*grāhi*, the grasping female fiend who seizes men and kills them (2.9.1), and a special charm is offered to banish her (6.113.1-3). Whether the evil *grāhi* has a direct connection to the quality of planets that are able to grab and possess is unclear, yet the first mention of the term “*grāha*” precisely as a planet also occurs in the *Atharva Veda*.<sup>155</sup> In the *Atharva Veda* the planets are invoked among other powerful gods such as Mitra, Varuṇa, Vivasvat and Mṛtyu (19.9.7). Another early usage of the term “*graha*” as a planet occurs in the *Maitrāyaṇīya Upaniṣad*, where the term is mentioned in conjunction with the moon and lunar asterisms.<sup>156</sup> The fact that celestial divinities such as the sun and moon were mentioned and praised in the earliest and the most authoritative religious texts set a future tone for the devotional veneration of all nine planetary *devas*.

The second textual category, the Hindu narrative tradition, gives more prominence to all nine planetary deities. Planetary *devas* are usually mentioned individually in conjunction with particular incidents, or metaphorical epithets of the gods.<sup>157</sup> The importance of the epics and Purāṇas derives from their depiction of the rise of the great theistic traditions of Hinduism. Those traditions mainly focus on devotion to Viṣṇu, Śiva, and Devī. The Purāṇas, for example, are usually classified according to their sectarian affiliations. At the same time, however, many Purāṇas have a cosmopolitan character and an encyclopedic nature, which are reflected in the treatment of multifarious subjects such as medicine, politics, rituals, mythology, palmistry, metrics, and astrology.<sup>158</sup> Markel calls *Agni Purāṇa*, for instance, “a virtual encyclopedia of Hindu

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<sup>155</sup> Markel, *Origins of the Indian Planetary Deities*, 133.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>158</sup> J. L. Shastri, preface to *The Garuda Purāṇa*, ed. J. L. Shastri, trans. A Board of Scholars, vol. 12 of *Ancient Indian Tradition & Mythology Series*, The Garuda Purāṇa (Delhi: Shri Jainendra Press, 1978).

lore, with topics ranging from summaries of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* to Vaiṣṇava sacrificial practices.”<sup>159</sup>

Furthermore, not only the great pan-Hindu gods, Viṣṇu, Śiva, and Devī, are revered in the Purāṇas, but also minor gods and goddesses, including planetary *devas* are widely discussed. In particular the *Agni Purāṇa* elaborates various classes of astrological divinities.<sup>160</sup> Another early Puranic works, the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, lists all planetary deities twice and devotes separate chapters to the description of the sun, description of the moon, and the planetary system.<sup>161</sup> Further, by its many references to astrologers and planetary deities *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* demonstrates the prevalence of astrology in the lives of ancient Indians, especially royalty.<sup>162</sup> Yet, the most extensive reference to astrology and astronomy among all Purāṇas is given in *Nārada Purāṇa*.<sup>163</sup> The *Nārada Purāṇa* dedicates three chapters, a total of 1311 verses, to the subjects of mathematics and astronomy, delineation of horoscopy, and natural astrology.<sup>164</sup>

Another major text in the Hindu narrative tradition, the renowned epic poem *Mahābhārata*, alludes to the planetary deities in various stories that are embedded in its primary plot. In *Mahābhārata* numerous exploits of planetary *devas* are described. In

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<sup>159</sup> Markel, *Origins of the Indian Planetary Deities*, 165.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> H. H. Wilson, trans. *The Viṣṇu Purāṇa* (Calcutta: Pusti Pustak, 1961), book 2, chapters 8,9,12.

<sup>162</sup> Nileshvari Y. Desai, "Glimpses from Astrology and Chiromancy in the Markaṇḍeya Purāṇa," in *Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, ed. Nagendra Singh (New Delhi: Anmol Publications PVT LTD, 2000), page 1036, <http://books.google.com/books?id=7R1XYNFoq4AC&pg=PA1036&dq=Glimpses+from+Astrology+and+Chiromancy+in+the+Markandeya+Purana&cd=1#v=onepage&q=Glimpses%20from%20Astrology%20and%20Chiromancy%20in%20the%20Markandeya%20Purana&f=false> (accessed March 14, 2010).

<sup>163</sup> Markel, *Origins of the Indian Planetary Deities*, 170.

<sup>164</sup> *Nārada Purāṇa*, ed. J. L. Shastri, trans. Ganesh Vasudeo Tagare, vol. 16 of *Ancient Indian Tradition and Mythology* (Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, 1981), page 498.

many instances, the planetary myths function as an explanation of planets' astronomical aspects and astrological significance. For instance, the legendary marriage between Candra (the moon) and the twenty seven daughters of Dakṣa, who are identified as *nakṣatras* (lunar asterisms), explains the moon's periodic phases of waxing and waning as well as his close association with *nakṣatras*. Another, even more popular story, about the churning of the Milk Ocean, explains Rahu's demonic nature and his deep animosity toward the sun and the moon. Since the sun and the moon disclosed Rahu's disguise leading to his decapitation, in revenge Rahu periodically swallows the luminaries causing solar and lunar eclipses. Even though the planets are deified and their mythological deeds are narrated to explain their nature and celestial movement, it is apparent from the specific astronomical details included in the verses that the ancient Indian seers understood the natural celestial processes of the sun, the moon, and the other planets, and expressed their perceived knowledge in the mythical tales.<sup>165</sup>

The third textual category that directly pertains to jyotish consists of ancient classical astronomical and astrological texts. These constitute the first set of texts devoted exclusively to the subjects of astronomy and astrology. At present there exist in India and outside of it some 100,000 manuscripts on the various aspects of jyotish.<sup>166</sup> To uncover the rich history of the development of astrological and astronomical knowledge of ancient India, the discussion of this category should begin with *Jyotiṣavedānga*, the earliest known Indian text that focuses solely on astronomy, dated 400 BCE.<sup>167</sup> However, since the detailed chronological tracing of astrological and astronomical texts has already been

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<sup>165</sup> Markel, *Origins of the Indian Planetary Deities*, 33.

<sup>166</sup> David Edwin Pingree, *Jyotiḥśāstra: Astral and Mathematical Literature*. (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1981), page 118.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

rendered by Pingree<sup>168</sup> and Markel<sup>169</sup>, and since the goal of this chapter is to discuss briefly the most influential astrological texts, I will skip forward to 505 CE,<sup>170</sup> to the time of Varāhamihira – one of the most renowned astronomers in all of Indian history.

Varāhamihira was probably the court astrologer for Yaśodharman (530-540 CE) in Ujjain.<sup>171</sup> Most likely he descended from a lineage of Sun-God worshippers. According to tradition, Varāhamihira's genius flowered as a result of Sūrya's unique boon. Some sages even considered him to be an incarnation of the Sun-God himself.<sup>172</sup> Varāhamihira was a prolific and versatile author; his corpus of writings covers the related branches of mathematical astronomy, horoscopy, military astrology,<sup>173</sup> and divination, or predictive astrology. He is also supposed to have written on the subjects of architecture, eros, and poetics.<sup>174</sup> Altogether six major and several minor works, and at least sixteen additional compositions are attributed to him.<sup>175</sup> Varāhamihira's writings on horoscopic astrology include the renowned *Bṛhat Jātaka* (Great Horoscopy) in which various astrological correlations to the planetary deities, including their personality traits and anthropomorphic characteristics are described.<sup>176</sup> Varāhamihira defines horoscopy as the

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<sup>168</sup> Please see *Jyotiḥśāstra: Astral and Mathematical Literature*, by David Edwin Pingree (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1981).

<sup>169</sup> Please see *Origins of the Indian Planetary Deities*, by Stephen Markel (New York: Lewiston, 1995), pages 135-152.

<sup>170</sup> Ramakrishna M Bhat, Introduction to *Bṛhat Samhitā*, trans. Ramakrishna M Bhat (Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, 1981), page xi.

<sup>171</sup> Markel, *Origins of the Indian Planetary Deities*, 147.

<sup>172</sup> Bhat, Introduction to *Bṛhat Samhitā*, xi.

<sup>173</sup> Military astrology, or *yātrā*, is concerned with the interpretation of omens and begun in India during the late first millennium BC. (Pingree, *Jyotiḥśāstra*, p.107).

<sup>174</sup> Bhat, Introduction to *Bṛhat Samhitā*, xv.

<sup>175</sup> Markel, *Origins of the Indian Planetary Deities*, 143.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.



science of *ahorātrī* or the science of day and night – these being the broadest visible divisions of time – multiples of which give weeks, months, and years, and divisions of which give hours, minutes, and seconds.<sup>177</sup> If the first letter “a” and the last letters “tri” are dropped, the term assumes the shape of *hora*, and the author says that “*hora* Shastra<sup>178</sup> treats of the effects of the good and bad deeds of an individual in his previous birth; so that the moment a person is born, it becomes his lot to enjoy and suffer certain pleasures and pains for his past good and bad deeds – seeds cast into the cosmic region in one birth bring to bear sweet and sour fruits in another birth according to their quality.”<sup>179</sup>

Furthermore, Varāhamihira’s other important and enduring work is *Bṛhat Samhitā* (Great Compendium). According to Bhat, *Bṛhat Samhitā* is nothing less than an encyclopedia of astrological and other subjects of human interest.<sup>180</sup> The *Bṛhat Samhitā* devotes a separate chapter to each of the transits of the planets and their earthly effects. In addition to the first twenty chapters on astrology and the effects of the planetary deities, the topics range from meteorology and iconography to discussions of rainfall, clouds, gemology, architecture, and water-divination.<sup>181</sup>

Another important classical astrological treatise, the *Bṛihat Pārāśara Horā* is ascribed to the other distinguished astrologer of antiquity, Parāśara. *Bṛihat Pārāśara*

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<sup>177</sup> N. Chidambaram Aiyar, trans. *Brihat Jataka of Varaha Mihira* (Madras, 1885), page 4.

<sup>178</sup> Not to be confused with horary astrology – a particular branch of jyotish astrology known as Praśna, or Arudra Śastra. While horoscopy enables one to predict even the distant events of life, the horary astrology refers only to the events of the immediate future. Horoscopy astrology is based upon the analysis of the planetary positions at the time of individual’s birth, while horary is based on the position of the planets at any particular moment.

<sup>179</sup> Aiyar, trans. *Brihat Jataka of Varaha Mihira*, 4.

<sup>180</sup> Bhat, Introduction to *Bṛhat Samhitā*, xv.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

*Horā* consists of two sections: the earlier book (*pūrvakāṇḍa*) written between ca. 600 and 750, and the later book (*uttarakāṇḍa*) dated 750-800.<sup>182</sup> The importance of this work derives from its complex material, much of which is unprecedented. Among other subjects it discusses a purportedly unerring method to find out the *Niśeka Lagna* (or the moment of intercourse causing conception),<sup>183</sup> the nature of the newborn, killer (*māraka*) planets, curses in previous incarnations (*pūrvajanmasāpa*), smashing the killer planet (*māarakabheda*); *rājayogas* and *yogas* (planetary combinations) leading to wealth and poverty, rebirths, various conditions (*avasthās*) of the planets, and pleasures and sorrows caused by planetary influences.<sup>184</sup>

Finally, the fourth category, modern astrological texts, are like their ancient counterparts, fully dedicated to astrological and astronomical knowledge. The theoretical base of modern jyotish texts derives largely from their classical analogues, yet they play an important role in adapting the ancient, culturally bound concepts into the modern, cosmopolitan settings. For instance, if Parāśara would describe elephants and servants as assets of wealth, a modern text would translate it into luxury cars and employees. Modern astrological texts have various levels of complexity. While some are written for neophyte astrologers, or simply curious minds who seek self knowledge, others have complex terminology and serve as reference books for professional practicing astrologers.

It is important to notice, however, that none of the three interviewed astrologers were taught with the help of jyotish “textbooks.” The popularization of the new jyotish books is a modernization and “westernization” of the ancient system of jyotish. In

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<sup>182</sup> Pingree, *Jyotiḥśāstra: Astral and Mathematical Literature*, page 86.

<sup>183</sup> R Santhanam, trans. *Brihat Parasara Hora Sastra of Maharishi Parasara* (New Delhi: Ranjan Publications, 1984), page 12.

<sup>184</sup> Pingree, *Jyotiḥśāstra: Astral and Mathematical Literature*, page 87.

traditional settings a student of jyotish received his knowledge directly from his guru, who taught concepts and recited stories from memory.<sup>185</sup> Even when a text was used it was always expounded by a teacher and the correct meaning was derived under his vigilant assistance. The primary jyotish texts were written in metrical form in a very crabbed and obscure style, designed to stimulate the student's memory, but frequently not even pretending to provide the full algorithm for solving a particular problem, which was to be found in the guru's oral tradition.<sup>186</sup> The text's purpose was to jog the memory rather than to teach the complete course.<sup>187</sup> Thus, jyotish texts were written with the assumption that they would be studied under the guidance of a guru who would enliven them for the student.<sup>188</sup> "The facts of Jyotish can be transmitted through books, but the system of Jyotish must be transmitted from a teacher, a *jyotiṣi* (practitioner of jyotish) who has received the needed spark from his or her own mentor, one fire igniting the next, generation after generation."<sup>189</sup>

The figure of the guru is central to the devotional life of an astrologer.<sup>190</sup> The guru is the one who gives initiation and transmits knowledge. He guides the life of his disciple, and his authority ranges from providing a mantra for daily worship to influencing lifelong decisions such as marriage.<sup>191</sup> In times of difficulty or frustration, he provides support and advice. The *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa* refers to the guru as "the

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<sup>185</sup> Ashok Kumar Bhargava. Interview by author, October 4, 2009.

<sup>186</sup> Pingree, *Jyotiḥśāstra: Astral and Mathematical Literature*, 1.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> De Fouw and Svoboda, *Light on Life: an Introduction to the Astrology of India*, xxiv.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., xxiii.

<sup>190</sup> Kumar Ashok Bhargava, interview by author, October 24, 2009

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

wind-god, Varuṇa, the mother and the father, a friend as well as the eternal Brahman. Therefore no one else is more adorable than the teacher.”<sup>192</sup> During the daily worship the first salutation is offered to the guru, and only then the family gods are adored. The Purāṇic texts exalt the guru to the level of the gods, “That is why it is stated that Brhmā is the teacher, Viṣṇu is the teacher, lord Śiva is the teacher. Teacher has a divine nature beside the sun and the moon.”<sup>193</sup> The devotion to the guru puts the disciple’s mind in a state of humility, veneration and openness, and that condition enables an effortless, and at the same time, a very powerful process of learning.

This important concept about the transmission of knowledge leads us to a discussion of the textual usage within the tradition. The first important clarification to be made is that a text is not only written, but also oral. Indian oral tradition takes its roots in the earliest known Vedic literature that consisted entirely of oral compositions, which were reduced to written form much later.<sup>194</sup> “The individual texts within the Vedic literature, as we may now understand the term, were, from the time of the earliest productions, organic parts of highly developed bardic and priestly traditions, that, in spite of many excellent critically edited texts, continue to be transmitted orally into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.”<sup>195</sup>

Hindu narrative tradition is a complex phenomenon, and is especially challenging to the western mind.

There is no historiography in south Asia, with a few exceptions, of the kind which developed in the Greek, Arabic and European traditions. This lack of historiography

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<sup>192</sup> Nagar, trans. *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa* 1: 117.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Frederick M. Smith “Vedas and Vedic Religion,” 1.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

had made the dating of Sanskrit text difficult and has reinforced a tendency to construct India as ahistorical, mythical, and irrational, in contrast to the West – seen as historical, scientific and rational. The construction of India as the West’s irrational ‘other’ has tended to hide the strongly ‘rationalist’ element in Hindu culture (the science of ritual, grammar, architecture, mathematic, logic and philosophy) and underplay the mythical dimension of western thought.<sup>196</sup>

Nevertheless, Hindu culture did produce elaborate mythical narratives in which the distinction between “history,” “hagiography,” “science” and “mythology” are not clear and, in most cases, are not important. Indeed, the Sanskrit term *itihāsa*<sup>197</sup> incorporates both western categories of “history” and “myth.”<sup>198</sup> Hindu narrative stories are clearly presenting important ideas such as normative and non-normative behavior and sense of communal value and identity. Yet, what seems to be even more important is the process of a story being told, and the sense of truth it conveys that resonates deeply inside the listener.

To the present day the traditional way of obtaining and transmitting the knowledge of jyotish follows the principles of oral tradition. A myriad of stories and myths serve as an important pedagogical tool that helps to memorize and transmit astrological knowledge through centuries. It is a part of the spiritual path (*sādhana*) of jyotish to learn the myths and their cosmological import.<sup>199</sup> When those stories are repeatedly heard and well integrated, they help to consolidate jyotish’s complex concepts into the novice’s consciousness. The best possible way to hear and learn those stories is

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<sup>196</sup> Flood *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 104.

<sup>197</sup> *Itihāsa* is agglomeration of *iti ha āsa* that translates from Sanskrit as “thus, indeed it was.”

<sup>198</sup> Flood *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 104.

<sup>199</sup> De Fouw and Svoboda, *Light on Life: an Introduction to the Astrology of India*, 7.

from the guru.<sup>200</sup> “But because the tales themselves are also alive, they can speak softly to those who listen to them mindfully, even if they have no guru handy to amplify them.”<sup>201</sup>

One good example of such a teaching tale is the story of how the twelve *raśis* (constellations) of the zodiac got their lords. This single tale conveys the order of the rulership of the constellations in a way that is easily memorized; it summarizes the personalities of the planets; and it includes some astronomical knowledge – all in a format that is appealing to the ear and much more pleasant than rote memorization. This particular legend has been preserved solely by being told from one generation to the next, and up till now it doesn’t seem to appear in the classical literature.<sup>202</sup>

The story tells us that in the beginning there were Sun and Moon, the king and the queen of heaven. They were absolute monarch of the universe and they ruled from the constellation of Leo and Cancer respectively. One day, Mercury, who is responsible for communication, approached the Sun and asked for the piece of land in the zodiac for himself. The Sun, being naturally magnanimous and generous, satisfied his request, granting Mercury the constellation of Virgo located next to his own of Leo. Mercury, being a dual planet and master of duplicity and diplomacy, found it so easy to get land from the Sun that he waited until night and then approached the Moon, the queen of the night. He told the queen about the generosity of the Sun, and challenged her to do the same for him in order not to be outdone. Since Moon is the emotional mind that is always insecure, that knows that it has no independent light of its own and only reflects the Sun (the soul), it always trying to amplify itself. Thus, trying to duplicate processes that are

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<sup>200</sup> Ashok Kumar Bhargava. Interview by author, October 4, 2009.

<sup>201</sup> De Fouw and Svoboda, *Light on Life: an Introduction to the Astrology of India*, 7.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

part of the life of the Sun (the soul), the Moon (emotional mind) gave an affirmative response and granted to Mercury the constellation next to her own, that of Gemini. In this way, cunning and diplomatic Mercury, also known as a thinking mind, gained rulership over the two constellations of Virgo and Gemini.

Venus, who represents desire, saw what Mercury had done, and made the same request to the Sun. The Sun, being righteous and honest, replied that he couldn't give the piece of land that was already promised to Mercury, but he would grant the next lot, which was the constellation of Libra. Then, Venus approached the Moon and made the same request to her, in this way acquiring the constellation of Taurus. Seeing what Venus had done, Mars, who represents action, did the same, obtaining the constellations of Scorpio and Aries from Sun and Moon respectively. Requests from Jupiter, who represents wisdom, gained him the constellations of Sagittarius and Pisces. Finally, Saturn, who represents renunciation, the slowest planet and always last to know, got what was left on both sides – constellations of Capricorn and Aquarius.<sup>203</sup>

This order not only reflects the positions of the planets as rulers of the constellations of the zodiac, but also indicates the distance from the various planets to the Sun: Mercury being the closest planet, followed in order by Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and finally Saturn. The other, more subtle side to the story, also reveals the evolution of embodied consciousness, which arises from the soul (the Sun), and is experienced first in the emotional mind (the Moon). With the gradual development of objective thought, the thinking mind (Mercury) develops. The more the mind thinks, the more desires (Venus) it produces. Desires lead to actions (Mars). As one learns the results of good and bad actions, wisdom (Jupiter) arises. When wisdom matures, renunciation (Saturn) becomes inevitable since one becomes content with the gifts bestowed by the law of nature.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> De Fouw and Svoboda, *Light on Life: an Introduction to the Astrology of India*, 8.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

Besides being a powerful pedagogical tool, another purpose that mythology serves is a strengthening of personal connections between astrologers and planets. Constant listening, memorizing, and telling the stories in which the planetary *devas* are major personages enliven planetary personalities in the astrologers' consciousness. The planetary personalities become very real and tangible. Knowing how planetary *devas* were born, what they felt, and what experiences they had, creates an emotional response and personal connection to them. Gradually the planets cease to be distant and their stories transform into shared memories. These memories become like memories shared between intimate friends: they shrink the distance between the two and unite them in a lifelong bond of trust and reciprocal affection. While the astrologers keep the memories alive and devotionally share them with others, the planetary *devas* grant their benevolence and assistance in their personal lives and professions.

A good example, in which the planets are seen as anthropomorphic, possessed of likes and dislikes, desires, sentiments, and motivations –the full range of human emotions – is a myth about Budha's birth. The personal drama between Candra (Moon), Bṛhaspati (Jupiter), and Budha (Mercury) unfolds as follows. Once upon a time, Candra was roaming on the bank of the Gangā. There, he happened to encounter Tārā, the noble wife of his guru, Bṛhaspati. She came for a bath and was beautiful in her fine garments. The lower garment was suddenly removed by wind, and beautiful Tārā passed by wearing a smile on her face, and lowering her head in shame. Moved by the sight, Candra became infatuated and recklessly propositioned his spiritual teacher's wife. Tārā, fearless, became angry, "O Candra, disgrace to you. I treat you like a straw because you are crooked and are attracted toward the wives of others. In case you defile my chastity then you will suffer from the disease of consumption. You, leave me alone!"

Chandra, enraged, proceeded to rape and abduct Tārā. He continued to engage in love sports with her for a hundred years. Because he defiled the chastity of a virtuous lady, Candra earned a black spot in the disc of the moon. Thereafter, terrified by the



wrath of gods, Candra went to Śukra (Venus), to take refuge under his protection. Even though Śukra is a guru of demons and the enemy of Bṛhaspati, he is known as a benevolent and noble being. Thus, he advised Candra to repent and return Tārā to her rightful husband, the priest of the gods.

Meanwhile learning that his dear Tārā had been abducted by Candra, Bṛhaspati fainted. When he regained his consciousness he lamented unceasingly. A man without a wife is considered unchaste to perform the rites. “As the fire without the flames, the sun without the luster, the moon without the shine, the human without the strength, the body without the soul, the person without the base, similarly Īśa without Prakṛti is of no consequence.”<sup>205</sup> Crying and lamenting Bṛhaspati went to the abode of Indra. After hearing his story Indra became enraged and gathered a great army of the gods to attack Candra and return Tārā.

Śukra who had no choice but to protect Candra, who surrendered to his custody, raised an army of demons and a fierce battle was joined. After a prolonged battle, Bṛhaspati and the gods won the war and Candra was forced to return his guru’s wife. In the meantime, Tārā had a baby boy who shone like gold and whom she named Budha. Both, Candra and Bṛhaspati claimed the beautiful child as their own. At first Tārā refused to reveal the name of the true father, but after interrogation by Indra, she named Candra as the boy’s father. Despite that fact, however, Budha was taken to the household of Bṛhaspati, and was raised by him. The presence of two fathers in the boy’s life instilled a double nature in him, and he has been known for his duplicity.

Candra was forgiven for his sin, but was cursed by the gods to be divided in two parts, and to be polluted and marked by black spots. Śiva, the most compassionate god,

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<sup>205</sup> Nagar, trans. *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa*, 1: 472.

felt sorry for the wretched Candra and placed the Moon God on his head as an ornament to exalt Candra and restore his reputation.<sup>206</sup>

Like the previous myth about the twelve *rasis*, this story is also loaded with information about astronomical aspects (such as black spots on the moon), and astrological features (such as planetary characteristics, influences, and aspects). Yet, what especially shines through the story is the personification of the planets that allows an almost profane drama to unfold. The divine play that so closely resembles human experience creates proximity to the planetary personalities and their lives. The ability to co-experience the feelings of grief, rage, shame, lust, and love, by tapping into the mythological realm reinforces the intimate connection between astrologers and planets.

The other important way of using a text within jyotish narrative traditions is utilizing mythology as remedial measure. As was previously mentioned, planetary myth forms an important part of jyotish *sādhana* (spiritual practice). Over the course of centuries Indian astrologers have learned that the nine planets are very powerful and can even be dangerous, thus, astrologers invested considerable time and effort in studying ways to keep the negative consequences of the planets' influence under control.<sup>207</sup> One of the methods they developed for remedying the planets' ill-effects is the living myth. Listening, reading, or reciting mythological texts about the planets became a devotional practice that was pleasing to *devas* and functioned as a remedial measure against their wrath.

It is import to understand that all three major components of this spiritual practice are perceived as the living beings. The nine planets are the divine living beings, the practitioners are the human living beings, and the myths are the sacred living narratives.

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<sup>206</sup> Nagar, trans. *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa*, 1: 463-484.

<sup>207</sup> Svoboda, *The Greatness of Saturn: a Therapeutic Myth*, 18.

To better reflect the liveliness of a myth I will use the Sanskrit term *kathā*, which means “personified Story.”<sup>208</sup> Even though this chapter is dedicated to the jyotish textual heritage, the particular way of using *kathā* makes it difficult to perceive it as merely text. Instead, the deeper understanding of *kathā* can be acquired through the lens of a ritual. Reading, listening, or telling *kathā* are immersed in ritualistic settings.

*Kathā* has a therapeutic effect and working with a therapeutic story is much like working with other traditional therapeutic processes.<sup>209</sup> First comes the preliminary stage in the process (*purvakarma*), during which, one prepares oneself for the experience.<sup>210</sup> This may involve the lighting of a candle, or incense, going to a sacred place, doing breathing exercises, relaxing and calming the body and mind. Then comes the experience itself (*pradhānakarma*), during which some sort of catharsis should occur.<sup>211</sup> During that stage a practitioner mindfully reads, listens, or recites a *kathā*. Since every living being is composed of three principal parts: the body (*śarīra*), the mind (*manas*), and the soul (*ātmā*), the planetary remedial measures also work on all three levels.<sup>212</sup> The recitation of *kathā* is more likely to produce therapeutic emotional and spiritual catharsis, which will transpire during this stage, if one has been properly prepared.<sup>213</sup> Finally, comes the last stage (*pāścātkarma*), when one’s reintegration and rejuvenation occur.<sup>214</sup> After the myth is read, a practitioner exits the sacred space by either performing a closing ritual or simply by returning to the daily routine.

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<sup>208</sup> Lanman, *A Sanskrit Reader*, 139.

<sup>209</sup> Svoboda, *The Greatness of Saturn: a Therapeutic Myth*, 20.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> Rath. *Vedic Remedies in Astrology*, 410.

<sup>213</sup> Svoboda, *The Greatness of Saturn: a Therapeutic Myth*, 20.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

This scheme is reminiscent of the van Gennep's theory of rites of passage. Van Gennep has shown that all rights of passage or "transitions" are marked by three phases: separation, margin (liminal period), and aggregation.<sup>215</sup> Turner, went further and singled out the *liminal* period from Van Gennep's theory suggesting that "...during the intervening liminal period, the state of the ritual subject ("the passenger") is ambiguous; he passes through a realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state."<sup>216</sup> The liminal period is characterized by ambiguity, openness, and uncertainty. One's sense of identity dissolves, bringing about an openness to the possibility for change and new experience. It is likely that being in that clear, open, and ritualistically safe state, triggers the cathartic experience that positively affects the psyche of a participant. The more one opens to a particular sacred narrative, the deeper it penetrates, and the more profoundly it enriches one's life.<sup>217</sup>

However, according to jyotish tradition, the cathartic experience is not the only mechanism that helps to improve the practitioner's state. It is believed that the mindful utterance of a myth has an effect on planetary *devas* who are pleased by the practitioner's devotion. In exchange for attention and devotion, they grant their blessings and avert the wrathful effects of karma. In this regard, *kathās* that address *devas* are not simply sounds to repeat or formulas that work on their own accord, but rather, they require deep devotion and belief in the divine forces – the planetary gods and goddesses. Traditionally, *kathā* is recited on the day of the week that is ruled by the planet *kathā* addresses. The number of repetitions is determined by the practitioner's age plus one. If one is twenty

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<sup>215</sup> Arnold von Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge, 1960)

<sup>216</sup> Turner, Victor W. "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*." *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: an Anthropological Study of the Supernatural*. By Pamela A Moro, James E Myers, and Arthur C Lehmann. 7th ed. (New York: McGrawHill, 2008), page 92.

<sup>217</sup> Svoboda, *The Greatness of Saturn: a Therapeutic Myth*, 20.

nine years old, for example, and *kathā* is for pacifying Mercury, the reading should be done every Wednesday (the day ruled by Mercury) for total of thirty weeks.

Another devotional practice that involves reading *kathā* is preformed in a temple. In Śrī Devī Mandir, Fairfield, IA, the special *kathā* is read after every performance of *Satyanārāyaṇa pūjā*. The *Satyanārāyaṇa pūjā* is the full moon celebration that is performed on the full moon day of each month. It is believed that participation in this *pūjā* grants abundance in one's life, fulfillment of spiritual and material desires, as well as preserves and enhances harmony in one's family.<sup>218</sup> (In a horoscope the moon is responsible for the family relations and is most seriously considered in the questions of marriage and motherhood.) After the *pūjā* is completed, one of the devotees volunteers to read *kathā* for the congregation. The mythological story conveys the meaning of the ritual, describes its benefits, and stresses the importance of its monthly performance. It also prescribes the consumption of certain food – usually grains of wheat mixed with honey, nuts, and raisins. Thus, the celebration concludes with the consumption of the special *prasād* that was consecrated during the ceremony.

Our brief examination of the textual heritage of the jyotish tradition has shown the variety of texts and different ways of approaching them. The traditional usage of jyotish oral and written texts differ from the scholarly approach, which works from outside, using the text to help track and better understand the development of tradition. The two important roles that text plays inside the tradition – the pedagogical and remedial – both encompass devotion. The traditional way of transmitting knowledge was, and still remains oral. Even when the written text is used, it requires the assistance of a guru. Thus, a text can be fully accessed only through the devotion and veneration of a guru. Moreover, the tales that are heard from a guru are considered sacred and are handled with

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<sup>218</sup> Sri Devi Mandir, <http://www.sridevimandir.org/> (accessed March 26, 2010).

care and devotion. They function as important pedagogical tools that help preserve and transmit astrological knowledge through centuries. Thus, it is a part of the spiritual path of jyotish to learn the myths and their cosmological import. Furthermore, through ritualistic settings and mindful utterance of mythological texts, astrologers tap into the divine realm of planetary deities, and the reading of a text becomes an act of devotion. Lastly, a devotional recitation of planetary stories gratifies the planetary *devas*, who in reciprocation grant their benevolence and avert evil. In this way listening, reading, or reciting texts is seen not only as a devotional practice, but also as an astrological remedial measure. Thus, the devotional aspect was, is, and probably will remain, an essential part of the jyotish written and oral tradition.

## CONCLUSION

After reviewing (1) fundamental religious concepts that link jyotish and devotional practice; (2) astrologers' devotional practices, which are usually manifested through daily rituals, worship of family gods and goddesses, and planetary worship; and (3) the connections between the jyotish narrative tradition and devotional practices, we are in position to conclude that it is impossible to achieve the deep understanding of jyotish astrology without considering its religious alliances. "Far from being a peripheral adjunct to Hinduism, astrology is thus concerned from the outset with central religious issues such as fate and free will, reward, punishment and atonement."<sup>219</sup>

The fundamental premise that planets are seen as *devas* reveals the devotional attitude within the jyotish divinatory system. In order to become a genuine *jyotiṣi* (a practicing astrologer) who is guided by the voice of intuition, one has to submit oneself to the subtle powers of *devas*. Only through connection with them is an astrologer's mind able to tap into the divine source that grants lucidity and intuition. Even though classic astrological texts stress the importance of technical knowledge that enables chart calculation, in the age of vast astrological computerization this value gradually subsides. Although the knowledge of rules and principles of chart interpretation remains to be the backbone of astrology (since it equips an astrologer with the map that is necessary in the intricate labyrinths of karma), the interviewed astrologers claimed that intuition remains the most valuable tool – the only one capable of unlocking the karmic complexities that conceal the truth about person's destiny.

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<sup>219</sup> Gansten, *Patterns of Destiny: Hindu Nadi Astrology*, 63.

Moreover, constant worship of the divine creates an inner power that helps not only to rightly discriminate complexities of karmas, but also to mitigate its evil results by prescribing the best possible remedies. Today, jyotish astrologers remain faithful to their centuries old traditions and continue to propitiate planetary *devas* by performing the rituals and sacrifices.

Finally, the process of learning jyotish is also colored by devotion since the two basic components of knowledge transmission – a teacher and a text – are perceived as objects of devotion. Jyotish texts are often generically termed *vidyās*,

Every *vidya* is a goddess who must be worshiped in order that you and she may develop a personal relationship so profound that she can possess you. Jyotish is the *Jyotir Vidya* (the Lore of Light), a *vidya* which can be had only from jyotishis [practicing astrologer], because Jyotish is the study of all facets of the ‘lords of light’: the Sun, Moon, planets and stars.<sup>220</sup>

The full knowledge of jyotish can be obtained only through the guru.<sup>221</sup> Veneration of the guru is an important aspect of the astrologer’s spiritual practice, and above all jyotish transforms into a *sādhana*, a spiritual path, that guides and inspires his life. Jyotish astrologers continue to confess that devotion maintains an essential role in their life and practice, and the positive results of it are beyond the reach of doubt.<sup>222</sup>

This study has shown how the theory and practice of jyotish is closely interwoven with belief in Hindu precepts and Hindu ritual observance. Jyotish is concerned with the core religious beliefs of man’s place in the universe, moral responsibility, and the

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<sup>220</sup> De Fouw and Svoboda, *Light on Life: an Introduction to the Astrology of India*, 3.

<sup>221</sup> Kumar Ashok Bhargava, interview by author, October 24, 2009

<sup>222</sup> Kumar Ashok Bhargava, interview by author, October 24, 2009; Sarathi Vempati, interview by author, November 2009; Surendra K Pandya, interview by author, Fairfield, IA, October 4, 2009.



revelation of a coherent divine order underlying human experience.<sup>223</sup> When we overlook jyotish's religious aspect, we fail to perceive the full picture of it as well as miss the opportunity to enrich our perspective on Indian culture as a whole. The study of jyotish theory and practice therefore form an important aspect of the study of India's religions past and present. The scarcity of the scholarship on this subject shows western scholars' discomfort in the face of strong religious commitment. The research that has been done mainly focuses on the scientific aspect of jyotish, without paying much attention to its religious or devotional applications. Without denying the scientific aspect of jyotish astrology, this study illuminates another very important aspect of it – devotion. The recognition of jyotish as an important spiritual and practical system of knowledge leads to the broad opportunities in the scholarly research and adds new dimensions to the colorful picture of Indian culture.

Divination has been practiced within every major religious tradition, and continues to thrive even today within the boundaries of traditional religions as well as in the context of esoteric spirituality. The present thesis constitutes a modest beginning in the study of jyotish divinatory system and its relations to the broader scope of religious life of the past and present. Jyotish astrology in general is a vast field requiring much research, textual as well as anthropological. As we have seen Jyotish has played an important role in the history of Hinduism and continues to do so today. Thus, I hope that this effort will be followed by many others, each illuminating different aspects of this vital and fascinating subject.

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<sup>223</sup> Gansten, *Patterns of Destiny: Hindu Nadi Astrology*, 191.

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